MUSICAL RESPONSES TO HIV/AIDS:
A STUDY OF MUSICAL MEANING AND SIGNIFICATION IN AMERICAN SOLO
PIANO COMPOSITIONS ADDRESSING A MODERN-DAY EPIDEMIC

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Topic Statement

The purpose of this study is to investigate musical responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by providing a detailed analysis of two works for solo piano, each composed by gay men who died of AIDS-related illness: *AIDS Ward Scherzo* by Robert Savage and *Sarabande and Toccata* by Kevin Oldham. Drawing upon historical and analytical research methods, I will explore the ways in which a composer’s struggle with HIV/AIDS might impact his musical output, inspire his compositional process, and ultimately manifest through his musical expression.

Artistic Responses to HIV/AIDS

On June 5, 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a brief article in its weekly publication, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, discussing the cases of five gay men being treated for Pneumocystis pneumonia at hospitals in Los Angeles, California. One month later on July 3, 1981, the New York Times published an article under the headline, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” an event that ignited public awareness of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the virus the causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Over the course of the proceeding decade, HIV/AIDS grew into a pandemic in the United States and globally, claiming the lives of millions.

The artistic community was one of the American populations most profoundly affected by HIV/AIDS. Artists residing in the country’s urban centers were especially vulnerable to the pandemic – sexually active gay males in particular. In response to the widespread devastation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, artists turned to their own respective

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media of expression in order to address the devastation in which they were engulfed. In
the introduction to a compilation of various writers’ plays addressing AIDS, The Way We
Live Now, Michael Feingold writes,

…many of those affected are artists in their creative prime, and what an
artist gives the world is not the same as ordinary souls doing their jobs and
leading their ordinary lives. I am sorry for the brute fact, but when an
accountant dies, there is another accountant; when Mozart dies, there may
be Beethoven, but that is something quite different. And the world is not
always so lucky as to get Beethoven: after Shakespeare dies, there is only
James Shirley.  

Artistic responses to HIV/AIDS can be found in virtually every medium: theater, dance,
visual art, literature, music, and film. For example, Larry Kramer’s autobiographical
play, The Normal Heart (1985), portrays the tense sociopolitical climate surrounding the
epidemic in its early years. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, a less activist
creation, provided a poignant visual representation of the masses who were losing life to
the disease, thereby memorializing them and providing solace to their loved ones. For
the purpose of this study, I will focus solely on musical responses to HIV/AIDS –
specifically works composed for the piano.

Significance of Study

My interest in music pertaining to HIV/AIDS began eight years ago while I was
living in Denver, Colorado. An oboist colleague of mine invited me to perform in a
Mothers Day concert titled “Music for my Mother” to raise funds for the Colorado AIDS
Project. In the years following that initial concert, I proceeded to organize and perform
in numerous other musical events on behalf of various HIV/AIDS nonprofit

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2 Michael Feingold, introduction to The Way we live now: American plays & the AIDS crisis, edited by
Elizabeth M. Osbourne (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), xiii–xiv.
organizations, including the Regional AIDS Interfaith Network of Colorado, University of Denver’s HIV/AIDS Awareness Committee, Human Rights Campaign, Joshua Gomes Memorial Scholarship Fund, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and New York AIDS Walk. The process of curating and performing in these concerts taught me the power that musical expression possesses for addressing a tragedy such as HIV/AIDS. Over the past two years, I have developed a subsequent curiosity about the extent to which HIV/AIDS has literally inspired musical works. This has led me to a wonderful body of music that I may not have otherwise discovered. In addition, my doctoral coursework at NYU has piqued my interest in phenomenology and semiotics – specifically pertaining to musical meaning and signification. Whereas a wealth of studies on the subject of meaning and signification in music are available, there exists an unfortunate dearth of writings this subject in the realm of HIV/AIDS. For this reason, I have chosen to devote my doctoral research to piano music intrinsically connected to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and, more specifically, to the possible extra-musical meaning that those works possess.

The vast majority of existing studies on musical responses to HIV/AIDS center on the epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa; however, most of these studies explore music as a vehicle for education and advocacy rather than musical works signifying the experience of HIV/AIDS itself. There exist a limited number of studies on HIV/AIDS in western music, none of which explore works for solo piano. My study will explore the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on composers who wrote music for piano during their battles with AIDS.

In comparison to the AIDS epidemic’s profound impact on the artistic community of the late twentieth century, syphilis correspondingly affected the artistic community of
nineteenth-century Europe. I will explore this parallel through an examination of the piano music of Franz Schubert, a composer who died at the age of thirty-one due to syphilis. I will examine Schubert’s letters, as well accounts of his friends in whom he confided regarding his deteriorating health. Like composers with AIDS, Schubert was fully aware of his illness and knew of his impending death. Numerous scholarly studies have explored whether Schubert’s physical suffering may have impacted the evolution of his late works. In the cases of Schubert and composers with AIDS, I will compare biographical accounts with each of their respective compositional trajectories. This parallel will help to shed light on the discussion of composers with AIDS, as well as to situate it in a historical context.

The subject of musical meaning and signification in instrumental music is a common source of debate among musicologists. Is it possible to derive extra-musical meaning from a musical work with no lyrics? To what extent, if any, can we meaningfully relate a composer’s creative process to his environment or personal circumstances? Many music theorists reject the notion of musical signification altogether, while others argue in its favor. To some extent, studies in favor of musical signification may be deemed speculative in nature; speculation, however, is by no means a meritless indulgence insofar as it elucidates valid possibilities. Speculations regarding musical meaning address the valid suggestion that musical works arise from and evoke human experience. In the introduction to Musical Meaning, Lawrence Kramer argues

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that those who deem music a strictly “autonomous” process divorce it from the world from which it obtained its existence: “At one level, I am simply seeking to insist on a complementarity, a historically grounded stress on music as more a means of engagement with the world than of disengagement.”

To relegate musical compositions to the strictly foreground realm strips them of a foundational element: human experience and emotion – an element that many composers, particularly those in the nineteenth-century, ardently espoused as an integral function of their compositions. It is for this reason, along with my aforementioned interest in music inspired by HIV/AIDS, that I wish to further explore the questions and speculations regarding musical meaning and signification, particularly in the context of piano music composed by men suffering from AIDS.

**Selection of Works Addressing HIV/AIDS**

The compositions I will examine in this study are Kevin Oldham’s *Sarabande and Toccata* (1992) and Robert Savage’s *AIDS Ward Scherzo* (1993). Very few works exist for solo keyboard instruments specifically addressing the subject of HIV/AIDS. Having conducted thorough research of existing AIDS-related repertoire, I have found the following four relevant compositions: *...departed* (1990) by Fred Hersch, *Themes and variations for organ: ‘In memoriam’* (1989-1990) by Marilyn J. Ziffrin, *Common Threads* (1990) by Lawrence Axelrod, and *AIDS Ward Scherzo* by Robert Savage. I have chosen to omit Hersch, Ziffrin, and Axelrod’s works from this study because they each possess characteristics that deem them less relevant to my topic than Savage’s. Hersch’s composition is a jazz piano solo notated on a lead sheet, whereas Ziffrin’s is an organ piece; both thus fall outside of the stylistic realm of my topic. Axelrod’s composition,

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while written for classical piano, references the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt instead of the AIDS struggle itself; it is only peripherally related to my topic. I have chosen to include Savage’s *AIDS Ward Scherzo* because it is the most relevant to my topic.

While Savage’s composition specifically addresses his own struggle with AIDS, Oldham’s composition does not. My selection of this contrasting repertoire was intentional; I intend to explore musical signification pertaining to HIV/AIDS in a composition explicitly related to the disease, as well as one more ambiguously so. Oldham’s work, like Savage’s, was composed in the final years of his life while he was extremely ill. His lyrically emotive *Sarabande*, juxtaposed with the tumultuous *Toccata*, suggests to me a possible connection to the physical and emotional turmoil he was experiencing in response to his illness at that time. While the titles “sarabande” and “toccata” suggest a referential nature and are not entirely unprogrammatic, they are certainly less explicit in their reference than is Savage’s work. I have chosen to explore Oldham’s work due to its more ambiguous process of signification.

Axelrod and Oldham’s compositions each possess a diverse set of musical devices that evoke a wide range of sympathetic experiential responses in a listener. Both are multi-sectional works. Oldham’s work, originally composed as a *Prelude, Sarabande, and Toccata* (the Prelude has been lost), is a multi-movement work with starkly contrasting musical content, as stated above. Savage’s work is composed in traditional scherzo/trio form in which driving scherzo sections alternate with lyrical and reflective trio sections. Both works were composed in the early 1990s at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and before antiretroviral treatment.
Research Questions

My research will explore the following core questions:

1. Is it possible to deduct musical meaning relating to HIV/AIDS from instrumental music?
2. If so, to what extent do the selected works communicate the struggle with HIV/AIDS?
3. Is it possible to extrapolate HIV/AIDS-related connections from these works by analyzing each composer’s biographical data and conducting semiotic analyses of their works?
4. What does this say about the broader context of musical meaning and signification? Can these findings extend beyond HIV/AIDS?

Review of Existing Literature and Other Resources

No studies exist on either the Oldham or Savage works. For this reason, the bulk of sources I will consult address my topic only peripherally. As stated previously, the vast majority of writings on music and HIV/AIDS focus primarily on the epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even in the case of a select few existing sources that discuss western musical responses to HIV/AIDS, solo piano repertoire is not addressed. The sources I will consult fall into three categories:

1. HIV/AIDS-related music in the United States

   Of all the documents I have researched thus far, the source most closely related to my topic is a dissertation titled “Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States,” written by Matthew Christen Tift at the
University of Wisconsin – Madison in 2007. Tift’s dissertation explores musical responses to HIV/AIDS in three works: John Corigliano's Symphony no. 1 (1989), TLC's hip-hop song "Waterfalls" (1994), and the Red Hot Organization's AIDS benefit rap album America Is Dying Slowly (1996). Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1 is the only classical work discussed in this study. Through historical and analytical research methods, Tift explores the programmatic nature of these three works. I suspect that his dissertation will prove to be an invaluable resource for my research.

The AIDS Quilt Songbook, a collection of eighteen art songs for male baritone voice and piano, addressing various facets of the HIV/AIDS struggle, was compiled in 1992 by baritone William Parker and is one of the seminal works in the HIV/AIDS-related repertoire. Two dissertations have been written about the Songbook: one by Kyle Ferrill at Florida State University titled “William Parker and The AIDS Quilt Songbook,” and the other by John Clayton Seeholtz at the University of North Texas, titled “An Introduction to the AIDS Quilt Songbook and its Uncollected Works. Brian Bonin wrote a dissertation at Louisiana State University titled “An Introduction to the life and songs of composer Chris DeBlasio, with special emphasis on his cycle All the Way Through Evening.” All the Way Through Evening is a song cycle about HIV/AIDS, and includes “Walt Whitman in 1989,” Chris DeBlasio’s most well-known composition. “Walt Whitman in 1989” is included in the eighteen original selections in the AIDS Quilt Songbook. Finally, James R. Heintze’s book, Perspectives on American Music Since 1950, contains a chapter titled “Musical Responses to AIDS” that provides an in-depth discussion of the AIDS Quilt Songbook and its context in the social climate of the early 1990s.
Among the most recent studies on musical responses to HIV/AIDS is Rohan Spong’s 2011 documentary, *All the Way Through Evening*. The documentary follows pianist Mimi Stern-Wolfe and her small ensemble of musicians as they prepare for her 20th World AIDS Day performance. This documentary and Mimi Stern-Wolfe herself have become invaluable sources for my research. Stern-Wolfe is a close friend of many composers affected by AIDS, living and deceased, whose works I study. She has devoted a substantial portion of her life to the Benson AIDS concert series, an annual World AIDS Day performance in which she presents the compositional works of her deceased friends.

The Estate Project for Artists With AIDS is perhaps the single most comprehensive catalog of artistic output by HIV positive artists, artists who have died of AIDS-related illnesses, and artistic output inspired by HIV/AIDS. The Estate Project, which now houses its archives in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, maintains a website with a wealth of valuable information about musicians and musical works related to HIV/AIDS. Included on the website is a list of compositions under the heading, “Musical Works Addressing AIDS.”

Several articles and essays discuss musical responses to HIV/AIDS in America. Paul Attinello’s 2007 article, “Music and AIDS,” in the Arts section of the online publication GLBTQ.com, provides an overview of musical responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in popular and classical genres. This source is especially useful because it lists several HIV/AIDS-specific works that are not included in the Estate Project’s archives.

Two other articles that will prove useful to my research are Wayne Hoffman’s
“AIDS & the Music Industry: Caring at a Crossroads,” *(Billboard, 2001)*⁶ and Jeffrey S. Sartin’s “Contagious Rhythm: Infectious diseases of 20th century musicians” *(Clinical Medicine & Research, 2010).*⁷ These articles discuss in broader historical terms the effect of HIV/AIDS on members of the music industry.

2. Music Therapy

Colin Lee’s book, *Music at the Edge*, is a case study of the author’s treatment of Francis, a talented pianist and a patient in the terminal stages of his battle with AIDS. The case study documents Francis’ progression through various forms of music therapy involving the use of the piano. The author illustrates Francis’ exploration of his relationship with life and death through the use of musical communication. This source pertains to my study in the sense that it sheds light on the therapeutic aspect of musical expression as a means of coping with HIV/AIDS and, more specifically, as an emotional outlet.


3. Musical responses to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

I will consult existing studies dealing with musical responses to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa because they provide a similar template for adjacently relevant

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studies on the topic of my own study. Gregory Barz has conducted numerous recent studies in this field, including the following:


**Methodology**

For this study, I will rely primarily on qualitative research methods in order to describe the effect of HIV/AIDS on music from a phenomenological perspective. The research methods I will utilize can be divided into two categories: historical and analytical.

1. **Historical research**

The musical works I will address in my study possess an immutable bond to the historical landscape under which they were conceived. As such, I plan to incorporate an appropriate amount of relevant historical information in my discussion for the purpose of rendering a comprehensive depiction of each work in question. My historical research will consist of two types: written documents and oral histories.

I will consult books, articles, and other publications that provide historical data pertaining to my topic. I will also consult liner notes, program notes, and press releases for live concerts from the past and present day. I have already gathered and been given a large body of such documents by friends, family, and colleagues of Robert Savage and Kevin Oldham, as well as many other composers.
I will also collect oral histories by interviewing musicians, friends, and family of the composers whose music I will research. I have already contacted many of these individuals to inquire about the possibility of conducting such interviews, as well as begun conducting informal interviews in my preliminary stage of research. My potential subjects’ responses have proven overwhelmingly positive thus far, as they are eager to have their stories told. I feel honored to be entrusted with something so profoundly important to them.

Additionally (as stated previously), I will offer a historical parallel between composers affected by HIV/AIDS and Franz Schubert’s battle with syphilis. Having performed two recitals this past year illustrating this parallel, I have become intrigued by the idea that a composer’s compositional process is notably altered in conjunction with his tragedy and suffering. I wish to explore this concept further by delving into Schubert’s diaries and letters, as well as by investigating the timeline of notable evolitional junctures in his compositional style.

2. Analytical research

By exploring structural, harmonic, and other essential musical elements of Savage and Oldham’s works, I hope to illustrate how the composers’ use of various compositional devices facilitates the communication of their experience with HIV/AIDS-related issues. My analyses will draw largely from the field of semiotics, which I feel to be the most useful theoretical framework for a study on signification and musical meaning. I believe that a semiotic analysis will prove more useful than a mere surface analysis due to its emphasis on extracting musical signs and exploring the interplay between signs, the objects which they signify, and the interpretant, or subjective process
through which said signs assume meaning. For this approach, I will consult important semiotic authorities, such as Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s *Music and Discourse* (1990), V. Kofi Agawu’s *Playing with Signs* (1991), Arjan van Baest and Hans van Driel’s *The Semiotics of C.S. Peirce Applied to Music* (1995), Naomi Cumming’s *The Sonic Self* (2000), and Kenneth Cardillo’s doctoral dissertation, “Rereading the Language of Music: Toward a Reconciliation of Expressive Theory and Semiotic Analysis of Music with Implications for Performance” (Indiana University, 2006).

A discussion of philosophical issues pertaining to musical meaning and perception will also prove essential. I will draw upon studies by Lawrence Kramer and Keith Chapin, including *Musical Meaning* (2002) and *Musical Meaning and Human Values* (2009). I will also consult contemporary studies in the field of musical meaning by Peter Burkholder and Roger Kendall. Through these sources, I hope to gain insight into the potential ways in which instrumental works might literally communicate HIV/AIDS-related experiences and, more specifically, the compositional processes that facilitate this.

**Concluding Remarks**

An examination of music inspired by HIV/AIDS will prove invaluable to the field of musical meaning. This study will provide a contemporary perspective on an oft-debated field of musicological study, applying the methodology of semiotic analysis to a repertoire with an eye towards examining that music’s sociological and historical context.

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Certainly, I embark on this process aware of myriad opponents\textsuperscript{9} to my view that music can possess extra-musical meaning. In fact, it is this very controversy that further provokes my interest in the subject. From my experience with semiotic analysis, I have been impressed by its unique facility for elucidating more abstract musical devices; it is my hope that this type of analytical approach will prove useful for exploring connections between the musical and non-musical. I suspect that the line between music and lived human experiences is not as impermeable as some adamantly maintain.\textsuperscript{10} The piano possesses a substantially wide range of expressive capabilities ideally suited to communicating the richness of emotional experience associated with HIV/AIDS. I am thrilled by the prospect of embarking on a study of musical works so intimately embedded in contemporary American history.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
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