

JOSH MODNEY



ENGAGE

I.

1. Sam Pluta: *Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit* (2011) [6:28]
violin and live electronics

2. Taylor Brook: *Vocalise* (2009) [11:19]
violin solo with drone

3. Kate Soper: *Cipher* (2011) [13:52]
soprano and violin

- I. Jenny Holzer feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein
- II. Pietro Bembo feat. Michael Drayton
- III. Introducing Sigmund Freud
- IV. Guido d'Arezzo presents Sarah Teasdale (feat. Jenny Holzer)

4. Anthony Braxton: *Composition No. 222* (1998) [12:07]
violin solo

Sam Pluta, electronics
Kate Soper, soprano

II.

1. J.S. Bach: *Ciaccona* (1720), with Just Intonation [14:04]
violin solo

2. Eric Wubbels: "*the children of fire come looking for fire*" (2012) [25:57]
violin and prepared piano

Eric Wubbels, piano

III.

Josh Modney: *Violin Solos* (2017)

1. Polyphony (for SP) [7:28]
2. Cadential [7:03]
3. Engage [5:30]
4. Pastoral [10:35]
5. Range [10:18]



JOSH MODNEY: ENGAGE

In loving memory of Rosemary Lonergan

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ON BEING BEYOND MODERNISM

By Nate Wooley

A friend of mine recently told me that, in his opinion, *modernism* would remain the dominant aesthetic in art, writing, and music for the next couple of centuries—at least.

My initial response was—“yuck”.

I should make it clear that I’m not a reactionary pining for the days of romanticism. I embrace the new! In fact, I would—with caveats—use the term *modern*, or even *modernist* to define my cultural taste. In my daily life, I read books by authors that count themselves amongst the avant-garde, films that toy with contemporary narrative and visual ideas, and listen to music that has no audible connection to tradition. I want the future!—or, failing that, I will settle for *right now*.

So, understandably, it is worth a little effort to figure out why I had responded with such revulsion to my friend’s prediction of the continued ascendance of *modernism*. I don’t have a problem with the idea *in practice*, but there remains something in my relationship to the *term* itself that demands a deeper dive into my own aesthetic. I need to know why and when *modernism* became such a filthy word to me.

I start my quest in the time-honored tradition of high school speech students everywhere—the dictionary. But, *modernism’s* entry gives one very little besides tautology. Paraphrasing a typical definition across multiple editions, *modernism* is that which undertakes being modern—the act of being contemporary or, in slightly more “touchy-feely” terms, “being in the moment”. If one follows a rather narrow version of this definition, in other words, *modernism* should preclude looking to the future or the past. However, the term has been used in the arts to limit historical work in deference to the strictly current or progressive. It’s this practice of treating contemporaneity as a zero-sum proposition that I find to be at the root of my problem—and where my revulsion with the idea of *modernism* begins.

To deliberately ignore the past, in favor of ‘being in the moment’, feels less *avant-garde* than needlessly exclusionary. Does great art lose its power simply by having been made in a past era? In some cases...yes.

However, there would be enough exclusions to render a blanket denial of past work completely moot.

To be clear, I am neither historicist nor revisionist. I only go into such detail in order to finally get to this point:

I find myself drawn toward artists that leave themselves room to run with an idea—whether that is into the future or toward the past—those for whom it’s not enough to understand the work that came before you solely as a context for the new, but as the basis for a completely different way of thinking. I admire those who are not satisfied to simply set historical ideas next to each other with the hope that the imbrication will provide something of interest. I am inspired by those who take historical knowledge and run roughshod over it; using it as a conceptual stepstool to provide a better view of the possibilities. These artists rub the dirt of our collective past into all of their shiny new ideas in order to create something that speaks a different, more affecting, language.

I commit to this being a manifesto of sorts, a type of writing that I should and, for the most part, have outgrown as dream-like and utopian. But, I feel secure making a statement of intent here because the words sit along three discs of music made, not by figments of my imagination, but a group of artists actively engaged in making music with every quality outlined above: Kate Soper, Eric Wubbels, Taylor Brook, Sam Pluta, Anthony Braxton, and, of course, Josh Modney.

Modney has created a sound object that is nothing short of his own manifesto for the qualities I’ve been outlining. Beyond the thoroughly iconoclastic and future-oriented living composers whose music he deftly, and passionately, brings to life he looks to the past to find a new, and surprisingly moving, context for an old chestnut, the Bach *Ciaccona*. The violinist has taken, arguably, the most inviolable voice of musical history and played rough. The result is as stunningly new as is Soper’s *Cipher*, a piece that comes as much from Renaissance poetics as it does from cutting edge vocal and instrumental technique, or the work of Anthony Braxton whose historical influences, famously, run the gamut from Stockhausen to John Philip Sousa.

This set of music represents the act of collective determination and trust, with most of the works coming out of the friendship/workshop atmosphere of Wet Ink Ensemble. The compositions and performances are

built as much on relationships as they are on musical foundations of learning, and the result is revelatory. If Modney's statement stopped here, it would be a testament to the, thankfully, robust feeling of mutual aid within the new music world of the early 21st century. But, it's his own solo work that provides the final, emphatic, punctuation; gems of improvisation that tether a formidable technique to an absolutely rigorous personal aesthetic. These last pieces tie everything else together, making Josh Modney one of the artists we should look toward as the model of how the *new* can not only move forward, but to be active in 360 degrees and three-dimensions. And, whatever kind of –ism is ultimately pinned on an artist like Modney—that is what I hope is around for centuries to come.

ENGAGE

By Josh Modney

There's a moment in *Cipher* that tends to stick in people's minds. The soprano, delivering spoken text, moves toward the violinist and places a mute on the instrument, filtering the tone color. As the violinist continues to play, the soprano moves closer still and places several fingers on the strings, activating specific pitches along the fingerboard. With intricately choreographed movements, the two musicians play the instrument together, creating harmonies that would be otherwise inaccessible to a solo violinist. Simultaneously, the violinist begins to speak. The roles of voice and instrument, which up to this point have been vying for primacy, have become equal and intertwined.

The physicality of it all is striking. It brings the violin into sharp focus. The expressive and sonic capabilities of the instrument have been tested throughout the first half of the piece, and now, in a radical extension of instrumental technique, the violin sings in an entirely new way. It's also personal, drawing attention to the relationship between two performers and embodying the spirit of openness essential to adventurous musicmaking.

Cipher was written for me by Kate Soper. We met on a weekly basis for several months, workshopping material from the ground up, from Renaissance tuning exercises to experiments in vocal-instrumental timbre. The piece was not made for the abstract forces of "a soprano" and "a violinist", but for Kate and



Josh, rooted in the work we had already done together in the composer-performer collective Wet Ink Ensemble. It's a working method and philosophy that has guided the genesis of many Wet Ink compositions. Among those most personal to me are Eric Wubbels's "*the children of fire come looking for fire*" and Sam Pluta's *Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit*.

Making music this way is incredibly rewarding and empowering. It builds trust, which is essential to performing chamber music. Trust encourages risktaking, which enables the real adventures in sound and form to take place, for boundaries truly to be broken. The result is maximum investment from both composer and performer, extending the life of the piece and vastly expanding the potential for creativity. The premiere performance is only the first milestone in a process that includes revision, reinterpretation, touring, memorization, recording. In this way a performance practice is developed over time.

The search for new frontiers in violin playing and the cultivation of performance practice through sustained commitment to projects and collaborators has become something of a guiding artistic philosophy for me, and is an ideal reflected in all of the material on *Engage*. The duos by Pluta, Soper and Wubbels stem directly from the "band" ethos of Wet Ink, while the music of Anthony Braxton is by its nature a generator of unique performance practices through a fluid, modular design that galvanizes individual creativity. The interpretation of Taylor Brook's *Vocalise* on this recording is the product of detailed work with Taylor over the course of numerous performances over many years. And by recontextualizing J.S. Bach's *Ciaccona* in Just Intonation, a contemporary concept of violin sound is mapped onto a classic, carving out space for new expressive potential while embracing the necessarily contemporary nature of any modern interpretation of antique music.

Finally, my own improvised music for solo violin represents a distinctly personal performance practice woven from many of the same threads that run through the rest of the album, inspired by a decade of work within a community of adventurous musicians that thrives on the interconnectivity of composition, improvisation, and interpretation.

Engage is divided into three individual programs, which together form a continuous progression of music.

I.

Sam Pluta's music is dynamic, extreme, and heartfelt, just like his incredibly virtuosic live electronic performances. Sam's writing for acoustic instruments is linked closely to his nuanced understanding of electronic sound. In *Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit*, the violin part is a rigorously notated tribute to the playing of violinist Jem Altieri, while the electronics part is improvised by Sam. In the context of *Engage*, Pluta's duo acts as a prelude. It sketches out the breadth of the violin sounds explored throughout the album, from fully resonant pitch and harmony to harsh noise, and all manner of subtleties in between.

Taylor Brook's *Vocalise* presents a version of the violin that is beautiful in a way that is familiar, yet strange. The characteristically lush sound of the violin is heard over a drone, weaving through an intricate micro-tonal pitch space. Throughout all of the music on *Engage*, Just Intonation (that is, tuning based on the natural ratios of the harmonic series) is used as a harmonic, melodic, and timbral device. It is in *Vocalise* most of all that a melodic usage of Just Intonation comes to the fore, the pitch relationships becoming more and more adventurous as the tone of the violin gradually shifts from sweetness to a big, bright, extremely colorful palette.

Kate Soper's *Cipher* operates in a liminal zone of language, meaning, pitch and timbre. At the start of the piece, voice and violin are fused into a single entity that ripples with subtle changes in color. The voice and the violin have long been associated with each other, and their essential qualities are indeed quite similar. However, the extended techniques of each diverge from one another dramatically, enabling the material in *Cipher* to morph into myriad extremes and then realign in uncanny unison. It is a searching work that travels to many places, employing a wide variety of violin sounds and Soper's own uniquely versatile vocal technique.

Anthony Braxton's *Composition #222* allows for a great deal of creativity from the individual performer. It is part of a series of compositions called *Ghost Trance Music (GTM)*, in which a wide variety of materials may be interwoven with a single-line melody. The influence of Braxton's music and creative artistic philosophy on my generation of musicians cannot be overstated.

GTM scores may be performed by any number of players. In making a solo violin interpretation of *Composition #222* (originally scored for violin and piano), my aim was to take what I learned from large ensemble performances of *GTM* and translate that sound into a polyphonic solo composition. As the final work on the first program of *Engage*, this performance lets the violin roam wild in a sonic environment where, to quote Sam Pluta's writing about his own music, "anything and everything is possible and acceptable at any moment." The previous works on the program have made polyphonic music by pairing the violin with other elements—live processing, drone, duo partner. In the free creative artistic space of Braxton, the violin makes polyphony all on its own. The result is a layered texture that emulates the orchestrational decisions that a creative ensemble makes in real time. The initial sound of the *GTM* line is shadowy and hushed, allowing for interjections that are "orchestrated" with extreme tone colors on the violin.

This is the only piece on the album in which any sort of breakdown of the violin happens—in the final section, in a whirlwind of *GTM* interspersed with secondary, tertiary, and improvised materials, the lowest string of the violin is detuned until pitch becomes rhythm, the loose string slapping against the fingerboard. The breakdown of an instrument is not something I take lightly, but it felt right for this piece. There is something about the boundless possibility of Braxton's music that needed to reach a crisis moment. But after musical materials have been exhausted, the instrument rendered inoperable, where do you go next? Back to Bach, I suppose.

II.

The connection between J.S. Bach and Eric Wubbels—composers separated by a great gulf of time and cultural difference—may not leap off the page, but to me it is a strong one. Bach's *Ciaccona* from the D Minor Partita and Wubbels's "*the children of fire come looking for fire*" are rigorously composed, boundary-breaking pieces. Both works access an inner, spiritual life. They are both centered around D and play with the acoustic instability of minor, a mode that is constantly pulled back to major by the natural properties of the harmonic series. In the Wubbels, rather than through any direct relationship to functional harmony, this conflict manifests itself in the affect of specific Just Intonation ratios. Double stops on the violin derived from different primes of the harmonic series tug the listener from a complex,

“minor” feeling to a simple “major” one. Bare open fifths alternately imply loss or an enveloping warm embrace. It’s all about juxtapositions and context.

It was through the process of collaboration with Eric that I learned how to precisely control difference tones on the violin. Difference tones are a psycho-acoustic phenomenon. When we hear two or more pitches simultaneously, our brains fill in the fundamental of those pitches. When the pitches are tuned in a manner that corresponds exactly to ratios of the harmonic series, we perceive the fundamental strongly. If you play a series of intervals formed from different strata of the harmonic series, a ghostly psycho-acoustic “bassline” emerges. In “*the children of fire...*”, Wubbels realizes this virtual bassline on the piano. This is one of many novel methods that Wubbels uses in the piece to fuse the timbres of violin and piano, two instruments that are notoriously difficult to blend.

As a treble instrumentalist, the ability to generate my own virtual bassline opened up a universe of possibility, and the beautifully ambiguous harmonic design of Bach’s solo violin music seemed a perfect match for the boundless playground of Just Intonation.

My Just Intonation Bach project began as an analytical challenge, a search for tuning ratios that would reinforce harmonic motion already implied by the notation. This intellectual exploration quickly developed into an intuitive, creative process that considers how juxtapositions of tunings and timbres might heighten the emotional qualities of the music, and how a contemporary approach to sound production on the violin might illuminate hidden details. Besides revealing a psycho-acoustic fundamental, the Just Intonation sonorities have distinct personalities, linked to the prime numbers that the intervals are derived from (e.g., ratios of three might sound “earthy”, ratios of five “sweet”, ratios of seven “restless”). The fissures that form between prime interval families open up endless expressive possibilities. When applied to the Bach *Ciaccona* on a micro level, dissonances are heightened, resolutions sweetened. On a phrase level, zones of light and dark are revealed. Globally, the shift between minor and major sections takes on a wrenching immediacy.

The *Ciaccona* is a deeply emotional work, cutting to the core. The void left at the end of the piece creates another crisis moment. Where can we possibly go from here? Wubbels’s duo provides an answer—into

a sound that contains all sounds. "*the children of fire...*" begins with a sustained noise wall produced by overdriving the top string of the violin. It is a sound so complex and layered that it gives a sense of everythingness, a singularity from which the material for the rest of the piece is generated. What follows is music of incredible sonic invention, fierce technical demands and sweeping proportions, a rare work that can match the emotional intensity of the *Ciaccona*.

III.

The third program explores my personal relationship to the violin through a series of improvisations. The project is bounded by a self-imposed set of rules: the strings remain in standard tuning, the sound of the instrument is not modified by any external preparation other than the occasional use of mutes, and no editing, layering or augmentation of sound is done in postproduction. I wanted to see how far I could push the sonic potential of the instrument while keeping its fundamental "violin-ness" unchanged.

This is music inspired by my creative improvisation heroes, many of whom are wind players. It is motivated in part by a desire to find sounds on the violin that can match the intensity of, say, saxophone and trumpet multiphonics, or the intriguing variations caused by circular breathing (breath = bow). It is also an attempt to move fluidly between methods of sound production inspired by various musical practices that I've been deeply involved with over the years. On one level this music functions as a series of studies in the outer realms of violin technique, spurred by a curiosity for the novel and the extreme. However, the focus on particulars of sound is ultimately used as a tool in pursuit of a more meaningful mode of personal expression, as the fluency of movement between strongly defined sound identities strives toward language.

This way of working with material—allowing rigorous investigations into sound to be the spark that illuminates a deeper path toward form, expression, emotion, language—represents an ethos that permeates all of the works on the album. My own solo music is simultaneously a culminating point, reflecting the collaborations, community, and sounds assembled on *Engage*, and a jumping-off point into whatever artistic terrain lies ahead.

WORDS FROM THE COMPOSERS

SAM PLUTA: *Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit*

Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit is the acoustic/electro-acoustic version of the solo violin part from the first movement of *Portraits/Self-Portraits*, which itself is a re-imagining and re-orchestration of the sounds and processes found on *sum and difference*, an album featuring Peter Evans, Jem Altieri, and myself. After working on this album in the fall of 2010, these were the sounds in my head, so I decided it would be wise to follow my brain where it wanted to go and make instrumental versions of these improvised electro-acoustic tracks. The violin part of *Jem Altieri...* is a direct transcription of Jem's playing, which I transcribed with their help and could never have written without them. This piece is dedicated to Josh Modney, in celebration of the 200th birthday of the great Maestro Scroll. —SP

TAYLOR BROOK: *Vocalise*

Vocalise is largely influenced by my exposure to and study of Hindustani music. The title refers both to the long lyrical sections performed on a single violin string, as in the famous *Vocalise* of Rachmaninov, as well as the singing style of Hindustani music with its long sweeping lines and virtuosic use of glissando and portamento. This piece is not meant to sound like Hindustani music, instead it presents a consideration of many of the structural and theoretical elements of Hindustani music as inspiration, an honorific recontextualization.

Vocalise consists of a single movement with several internal sections, each focusing on different strings of the violin. Furthermore, each section has a faster pulse than the previous one, giving the work a sense of large scale acceleration. The entire work is accompanied by a slightly flat F-sharp drone, to which the lowest string of the violin is also tuned. This drone functions as the tonal center throughout the composition as the solo violin plays in a Just Intonation mode in relation to it.

Vocalise is dedicated to the violinist Mira Benjamin, for whom it was composed in 2009. —TB

KATE SOPER: *Cipher*

Cipher wends its way along the slippery slopes where language and music and meaning collide, exposing the inherent ambiguity of musical temperament, ensemble hierarchy, and lyric comprehension via several centuries of linguistic investigations. Visual artist Jenny Holzer prepares a rationale; Ludwig Wittgenstein warns of conundrums; Renaissance humanist Pietro Bembo fêtes the phonemes; Sigmund Freud scrutinizes dream reality; and Jenny Holzer reappears with a moral that may not be as forthright as it seems: “people can understand you when you say something.” *Cipher* was written for Josh Modney. —KS

ERIC WUBBELS: “*the children of fire come looking for fire*”

The spur for this piece, as well as its source material and guiding metaphor, comes from a cadence in the coda of an early Brahms piano piece (Op. 10, Nr. 4)—a bizarrely symmetrical, contrary motion “wedge” shape that contracts from a perfect fifth to a perfect fourth and inwards to unison.

In the context of this piece, the idea of the wedge (i.e. “>”) is converted to a neume that functions on every structural level of the piece, from global trajectories to micro-gestures and even physical motions for the performers. Additionally, the metaphorical implications of this shape (contraction, filtering, focusing in from a wide field to a single point; to stretch it further—tuning; further still—renunciation) structure the unfolding of the material over the course of the form. The material from Brahms is heard fleetingly at the end, rasterized to Just Intonation.

The piece was written for, and is dedicated to, Josh Modney, with whom the violin material was developed over the course of several months of meetings, working sessions, and rehearsals. The piece couldn’t have been written without his patient, open, and committed involvement in the process. —EW

CREDITS

I.

1. Pluta

Recorded and mixed by Sam Pluta
Buckley Recital Hall,
Amherst College (Amherst, MA)
January 13, 2016

2. Brook

Recorded and mixed by Ryan Streber
Oktaven Audio (Mt. Vernon, NY)
January 18, 2018

3. Soper

Recorded and mixed by Ryan Streber
Oktaven Audio (Yonkers, NY)
December 4, 2015

4. Braxton

Recorded by Patrick Higgins
Mixed by Sam Pluta
Future-Past Studios (Hudson, NY)
August 13, 2016

III.

1.–5. Modney

Recorded by Ryan Streber
Mixed by Sam Pluta
Oktaven Audio (Mt. Vernon, NY)
February 16, 2017

II.

1. Bach

Recorded and mixed by Ryan Streber
Oktaven Audio (Mt. Vernon, NY)
January 31, 2018

2. Wubbels

Recorded and mixed by Sam Pluta
Buckley Recital Hall,
Amherst College (Amherst, MA)
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Remastered by Sam Pluta for *Engage*
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All tracks mastered by Sam Pluta
Artwork by Alexander Perrelli
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and Emma Van Deun

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BIO

Josh Modney is a violinist devoted to creative musicmaking. He collaborates with many renowned artists and ensembles as part of a thriving culture of adventurous music that exists at the nexus of composition, improvisation, and interpretation. Josh is violinist and co-director of the Wet Ink Ensemble and a member of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE).

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ENGAGE

Polyphonic Solos and Duos for Violin

I.

1. Sam Pluta: *Jem Altieri with a Ring Modulator Circuit* (2011)
2. Taylor Brook: *Vocalise* (2009)
3. Kate Soper: *Cipher* (2011)
4. Anthony Braxton: *Composition No. 222* (1998)

II.

1. J.S. Bach: *Ciaccona* (1720), with Just Intonation
2. Eric Wubbels: "*the children of fire come looking for fire*" (2012)

III.

- 1.– 5. Josh Modney: *Violin Solos* (2017)

Josh Modney, violin
Sam Pluta, electronics
Kate Soper, soprano
Eric Wubbels, piano

Introductory text, "On Being Beyond Modernism" by Nate Wooley

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