# Introduction

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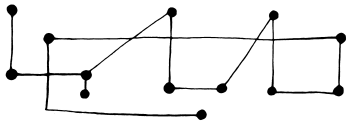

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When Scott Gleason brought up the idea of a special issue of *PNM* dedicated to John Rahn, following similar projects for Ben Boretz (2005–06) and Bob Morris (2014), of course I enthusiastically agreed to participate. Thinking through the various areas of interest/knowledge that we each brought, we knew that we needed a third party to address the many mathematically-oriented contributions we would certainly receive, and we asked Jason Yust, another former student of John's, to join. This is the first obvious thing that I'll say about John's impact on the field: that it took three of us to ensure that his vast range of interests and contributions were properly engaged!

John's incisively original music-theoretical, analytical, and creative work covers a *lot* of ground. As evidence I might simply list the seminars I took with him at the University of Washington: Music and Mathematics, Ancient Greek Music Theory, Critical Theory (twice: one course devoted largely to Deleuze and Guattari, another that covered a wide array of thinkers from Hegel to Foucault and Kristeva to Boretz and Randall), Twelve-Tone and Serial Music, Schenker (including a close, critical reading of Schenker's book-length *Eroica* analysis and hermeneutic attention to the mystical registers of Schenker's work), and an analysis course where students were encouraged to present alternatives to papers as their final projects

—"you might dance your analysis . . . ." Sadly, no one took him up on this quite serious invitation. John also wrote a piece for me, for two trombones, which takes advantage of the instrument's ability to modulate through different tuning orientations from the diatonic through enharmonic genera (from John's performance notes: "There are many different tuning sets for this genus; I'd prefer Archytos, but even quarter-tones would do since most performers and listeners now aren't trained to hear those distinctions."). A performance of *Greek Bones* (which I recorded in New York with Jen Baker) appears on the CD that accompanies *Open Space* volume 19–20.

As the various contributors to this volume will attest, my experience represents only a slice of John's extraordinarily broad and deep range of interests. His contributions to mathematically oriented music theory range from his seminal early work in logic and axiomatic set theory through his discipline-bending engagement with semi-groups, wreaths, tiles, and other "cool tools,"[1] and of course the ways he proselytized—in words and action—for mathematical and formal modes of thinking about and modeling music were instrumental in shaping the discipline of music theory as it was growing into its own (not least through establishing *PNM* as a main locus of that activity). The contributions by Guerino Mazzola, Larry Polansky and David Kant, John Roeder, Luigi Verdi, and Jason Yust in this volume are all deeply inspired by John's pioneering work. His work on critical theory helped bring many important (especially French) thinkers into the consciousness of North American music scholars. Our decision to include Patrick Nickleson's translation of Jacques Rancière's "Autonomy and Historicism: The False Alternative"—one of the few texts in which Rancière directly engages music—in this volume is a kind of testament to John's work in this area.[2] These two themes, mathematics and critical theory, mediated by loving attention to writing that is at once robustly rigorous—*viz.* the fastidious precision of axiomatic definitions in "Logic, Set Theory, Music Theory"—and evocatively playful[3]—e.g., in that same essay, a shift of meta-analytic attention described as a "return from the voyeuristic contemplation of the larger orgy to the closer pursuit of the particular nymph at hand"—in conjunction form a conduit to Princeton and arguably three of John's closest intellectual forebears: Babbitt, Randall, and Boretz. Scott Gleason's contribution to this volume draws out this connection, as does mine in a way.

John is, of course, a keen, thoughtful, and wholly original music analyst, especially when it comes to music of the Schoenberg–Webern continuum.[4] Central to John's analytic pedagogy is a commitment to help us hear our way through "atonal" musical structures with,

ultimately, as much facility as we might have with "tonal" ones ("Remember that your 'tonal filters' are worse than useless. [A] theory of atonal music should build you a set of 'atonal filters'"). Jonathan Bernard and Andrew Mead pay homage to this aspect of John's work; Bernard in a playfully mimetic way, adopting aspects of Rahn's narrative voice to take the reader through an original hearing of the second of Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*; Mead applying his own keen analytic attention to macro- and micro-details in an understudied composition, the *Variations on a Recitative*, op. 40. Similarly, Áine Heneghan contributes a remarkable exegesis of how repetition is conceived in Schoenberg's musical thought, which she frames through a development of John's highly original conception.

It is fitting that many of John's former students—Christian Asplund, Tom Baker, Gary Don, Orit Hilewicz, Elizabeth Hoffman, Brad Osborn, and Lynne Rogers, in addition to two of the co-editors—agreed to contribute. The breadth of topics and approaches is impressive: intertexual analyses of music videos (Osborn), multimedia composition (Hilewicz), and composers' graphic renditions of their practices (Hoffman); developments of interactive improvisational contexts (Asplund); ruminations on pedagogy (Don); sketch studies (Rogers); compositions-as-critiques (Baker).

And it is equally fitting that this tribute takes place in the pages of *Perspectives of New Music*. John has served two extended terms, first as editor from 1983 to 1993, and then again as co-editor with Boretz and Morris (the "3 gris") beginning in 2001. (For more on this history see Rahn and Vandagriff [2012]). A quick scan across the contributions in this issue reads like just about any issue of *PNM* since John first took the helm for Volume 22, which is to say it draws deep connections between many diverse modes of musical and meta-musical thought: formal mathematical modeling, historiography, critical polemics, original creative work, whimsical yet serious phenomenological engagement—as Elaine Barkin asks, "Can clarity be irrational? I suppose it can"; as Carlton Gamer suggests, "[a]s the work takes shape, its *persona* steadily attains a life of its own, with its own increasingly clear intentions" (referring to John's music and Gamer's own respectively). That's probably one of the biggest lessons John teaches us, which became especially clear while working on this project: that all of these seemingly diverse practices are variations on a theme, and that all are valuable—even more so in conjunction—and probably even necessary for developing an ecologically rich understanding of how music goes, or can go.

## Notes

1. See "Cool Tools: Polysemic and Noncommutative Nets, Subchain Decompositions and Cross-Projecting Partial Orders, Object-Graphs, Chain-Hom-Sets and Chain-Label-Hom-Sets, Forgetful Functors, Free Categories, and Ghosts," *Journal of Mathematics and Music* 1/1 (2007), 7–22.

2. See, for example, John's essays "Repetition" (in *Music Inside Out: Going Too Far in Musical Essays*. G+B Arts International [(1993) 2001], 7–20), "Differences" (in *Music Inside Out: Going Too Far in Musical Essays*. G+B Arts International [(1991) 2001], 21–34), and "*Mille Plateaux*, You Tarzan: A Musicology of (an Anthropology of (an Anthropology of A Thousand Plateaus))" (*Perspectives of New Music* 46/2 [2008], 81–92), as well as his translation of the dialogue between Michel Foucault and Pierre Boulez published in *Perspectives on Music and Aesthetics* (Norton [1994], 83–90).

3. Nowhere more explicitly than in "Chloe's friends (A Symposium about Music and Mathematics)" (*Perspectives of New Music* 41/2 [2003], 6–26), but literally everywhere in John's writing.

4. I have used his adumbrational engagement with the Thema from Webern's *Symphonie* (*Basic Atonal Theory*, Schirmer [1980], 4–17) many times in class—including in general introductory classes!