

(Untitled Nonviolent Music)

A Thesis Submitted by

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Abstract

I'm developing my thesis project to reflect the concept of musical nonviolence and the endowment of power in my compositions. Responding to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, I believe that nonviolence motivates people by helping them realize the power within them, against the suppressive forces sustained by the abuse of power. From my composer journey, I recognize how music carries huge potential to communicate with the dialectical sources that connect people with distant memories that store their rejuvenating motivations. The major part of the thesis is a response composition to musical nonviolence that (1) experiments with sound-event kinship, (2) explores forms/musical Deja vu, and (3) appeals to personhood. The desired effect of the composition is to invite audiences to engage with a personal memory of authentic experience during the performance, get into a state of meditation, or take other considered approaches to experiencing a moment of musical nonviolence.

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I want to express my sincere thanks to the many people who supported me along the way.

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...Suci Li. We support each other like fire girl and water boy in the Forest Temple. Hope to hear your composition again someday!

...My parents. You are always there for me. Love you both!

Yixiao Wang

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Program Notes

*...Because I felt the crisis awareness of a necessity to gain a deeper understanding of humanity's violence.*¹

In summer 2025, I stumbled upon this quotation from Part 3 of Sakamoto Library, as I was studying Ryuichi Sakamoto's published writings to interpret his musical compositions. Particularly interesting to me is that Sakamoto disliked using the phrase "the power of music" lightly, as sound, music, and military affairs were intertwined. The violence of sound was demonstrated by the LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Devices) for riot control in Portland, Oregon, in military bands of Turkish and Napoleon's army, and the PA systems amplification developed by the Nazis.²

While an active advocate in anti-nuclear and pacifist campaigns, Sakamoto did not proclaim to have composed music of nonviolence. I was thus inspired to initiate a corresponding composing project following his steps. Reflecting upon Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, which Sakamoto pointed to in the column article, I consider that violence is supported by (overwhelming) power. Such power, though supported by law, carries no justice and shall ideally be supplemented by pure violence from divinity.³ Nonviolence thus reflects a somewhat similar "noncooperation with evil" and a personal rejection of appealing to power.

¹ 龍一, 坂本図書.

² Yoshimura, "Professor's Activities, Part 24: Ryuichi Sakamoto Discusses the Relationship Between 'Acoustics' and 'Weapons.'"

³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*.

Ethics, morals, and mottos, etc., contribute to the composition of a person's judgment. Here is where I believe self-oriented motivation spawns. Musical nonviolence is thus meant to achieve the revelation of self-oriented motivation by experiencing music happening, whether by composing, performing, or active listening. "Presence" becomes an essential factor of composing in a personal narrative, to which I apply a sort of literary definition of "adjacency" (which is to be specific, tangible, and somewhat human) in the compositional conventions I use in this project.

Each section of the piece indicates a distinct happening of an event. Section A presents a faraway call that echoes in a – a – a' phrasing, somewhat common in classical music. The open fifth (Bb - F - C) is introduced here, and remains in the background throughout the piece. In contrast, section B stumbled into the foreground with dense chords, adding liveliness to the frame with call and response. The silently depressed notes are also introduced in this section. In section C, "the ticking of the clock" added a third constant middle ground to elements in the previous two sections, eventually giving way to the heavy gongs in the last section. The silently depressed chords, after successive inversions, conclude the piece with a F major chord responding to its Bb opening.

My motivation lands at composing for Tufts' own Distler Hall, where I have performed and attended live performances since 2021. The hall offers excellent sound balance, featuring chamber and symphonic music and magnifying the presence of many of the most minute sounds an instrument can make acoustically. The designed reverberation delicately amplifies the timbral details of instruments and projects their characters. This helps the two Steinway pianos employed for (*Untitled Nonviolent Music*) speak distinctly from one another in the hall. The long D-series

obsesses the audience with a brighter, crisper, poetic tone, while the model B serves up a deeper baritone in accompaniment.

The acoustic background of the performance hall provides a strong foundation for me to compose with nuanced sounds after the key hits. I would like to introduce a few strategies I applied in this piece:

- a. Even at pianissimo, a key can ring for over 10 seconds while fingers are holding. When it's the sole thing played, or within a chord, such minute vibrations are still audible. Inspired by singing bowls, church bells, and gongs, I have instructed the pianists to hear for the final release of the sounds before moving on to the next sonic event, because the notes don't truly decay at the end of the measure line.
- b. The sostenuto pedal, when used, sustains a selected group of notes. However, when other notes, especially those in the overtone series (and especially of the same pitch class), are hit, they also ring and create an attack-less sound of unique timbre. In addition, when these notes are held in different octaves, the ringings they create are also significantly different in both pitch and timbre. I wrote many of these into the piece, and the pianists are sometimes instructed to hold the notes with the pedal, making no sound at all. It then appears to the audience that an unknown disparity occurred between the visual and acoustic performance.
- c. Inspired by phase music, I realize that similar effects can be achieved acoustically as well. The envelope of sounds shows how acoustically different it is at different stages. In this piece, the prevailing chord note morphs some time after the attack, leading to instructions on how to release the pedal.

I really appreciate the opportunity to make this project happen, particularly for my mentors and the audiences at the April concert who supported my stagework. The sparse musical materials presented a somewhat theatrical display that found a mindful balance with the acoustic effects, and I'm grateful to my "adjacent pianist," Professor John McDonald, and all of my audiences that evening, who contributed an inviting space for the music to make its way through.

Performers' Notes

1. The boxed text in m.m. 2 and 3 indicates the desired finger techniques to achieve pianissimo. The chords in the entire piece are not desirable to be hit, but pressed down. The ones in rehearsal mark A are desired to be pressed down with nails to make it even softer. Also, chords in section A repeat in echoy fashion, and the second ones are always slightly fainter than the first. This calls for the pianist to flatten the fingers further into the keys to achieve softer attacks.
2. In m.4, the fingering on the F indicates a shift from the 3rd finger, left hand, to the thumb, right hand, before the left hand crosses over to reach the D. The expression text means to “light a sparkle” with the D, aiming for a different quality of sound from the crossover. The “lit” should be practiced in the remaining crossovers in section A.
3. The breath marks in the first system carry on through the remaining A section.
4. After the first repeat back to m.2, press down the sostenuto pedal instead of doing no pedaling until the end of the first system.
5. In section B, tempo is determined on the spot. When the chord is pressed down, not every note shares the same envelope, meaning that some will fade out while others sustain. Hence, the chords are held until the pianist hears the prominent note change, and should be no faster than half note = 60.
6. The chords with the cross noteheads are “silently depressed” (credit to John). Press down the chord without making any sound, press down the sostenuto pedal, and release the notes. Please do not lift the pedal until further instructions. To connect with a new, silently depressed chord, press it without making any sound first, then “refresh” the sostenuto pedal.

(Untitled Nonviolent Music)

Yixiao Wang

**No Rush, you have
all the time
in the world**

$\text{♩} = 36 - 45$

A

place palm on keys
then press down
with nails

softer, into the keys
with nails

Piano 1

*wait for enough
silence to
accumulate*

pp

lighter... lit

L.H. 3

3 5

3-1(R.H.)

2nd time sost. off

1st time non Ped.
2nd time sost. continue

Piano 2

6

breath mark simile

Pno. 1

L.H. 3

3-1(R.H.)

Pno. 2

10 To Φ

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

3 5

release pedal
after hands are off notes

L.H. 3

14

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

non ped.

L.H. 3-1

L.H. 4

fingers on notes,
press down gently

18

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

release pedal
after hands are off notes

L.H. 3-1

L.H. 4

L.H. 2

sost.

22

Pno. 1

sost. off

L.H.

Pno. 2

non ped.

26

Pno. 1

L.H.

sost., until m. 5 after the repeat

Pno. 2

B Very Slow

30

release when prominent note shift from F to D

...D to F

Pno. 1

f sub.

p (sub.)

f

p

Pno. 2

...F to D

...D to F

silently pressed down

f sub.

p (sub.)

f

p

sust.

38 ...D to F ...D to F

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

f *p* *f* *p*

f *p* *f* *p*

46 hold until overtones start to release

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

f *p* *f* *p*

f *p* *f* *p*

54

3 5

L.H. 3-1 L.H. 4 L.H. 2

sost.

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

3

58

Pno. 1

3 5

3-1(R.H.)

8 7

L.H.

L.H.

sost. off

Pno. 2

62

Pno. 1

L.H. 3-1

L.H. 4

L.H. 2

sost., until m. 77

Pno. 2

66

Very Slow

...F to D

...D to F

Pno. 1

f sempre

...F to D

...D to F

Pno. 2

f sempre

see performers' notes (6)

74

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

80

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

86

hold until overtones
start to release

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

94 C

Pno. 1

p

3 5

Pno. 2

96

Pno. 1

f

mute strings with R.H.,
at the tip near player

Pno. 2

p sempre

99

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

102

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

105

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

108

Pno. 1

p

sost.

f

Pno. 2

111

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

114

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

117

Pno. 1

p

f

Pno. 2

120

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

123

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

sost. until m.139

rit. - - - - -

126 (rit.)

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

To the slowest extent possible, but still flowing

129 **D** Very very slow ♩ = 30

Pno. 1

mf heavy, enough to
ring a twilight gong

Pno. 2

sost. off

133

Pno. 1

wrist down - up

5 4 3 2 3 2 3 4

Pno. 2

137

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

140

Pno. 1

pp fading into background

Pno. 2

143

Pno. 1

p

Pno. 2

muted on string,
near hammer

146

Pno. 1

simile

Pno. 2

149

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

151

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

152

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

154

Piano score for measures 154-158.

Pno. 1 (Bass Clef):

- Measure 154: Rest.
- Measure 155: Rest.
- Measure 156: Two eighth notes, B $\flat$ and A $\flat$, beamed together.
- Measure 157: Rest.
- Measure 158: Two eighth notes, B $\flat$ and A $\flat$, beamed together.

Pno. 2 (Treble and Bass Clefs):

- Measure 154: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 155: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 156: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 157: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 158: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.

159

Piano score for measures 159-160.

Pno. 1 (Bass Clef):

- Measure 159: A half note chord consisting of B $\flat$, A $\flat$, and G $\sharp$, followed by a fermata.
- Measure 160: Rest.

Pno. 2 (Treble and Bass Clefs):

- Measure 159: Treble clef has a half note chord consisting of B $\flat$, A $\flat$, and G $\sharp$, followed by a fermata. Bass clef has a half note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 160: Treble clef has a half note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a half note G $\sharp$.

161

Piano score for measures 161-163.

Pno. 1 (Treble and Bass Clefs):

- Measure 161: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 162: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 163: Treble clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$; Bass clef has a quarter note G $\sharp$.

Pno. 2 (Treble and Bass Clefs):

- Measure 161: Treble clef has a half note chord consisting of B $\flat$, A $\flat$, and G $\sharp$, followed by a fermata. Bass clef has a half note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 162: Treble clef has a half note chord consisting of B $\flat$, A $\flat$, and G $\sharp$, followed by a fermata. Bass clef has a half note G $\sharp$.
- Measure 163: Treble clef has a half note chord consisting of B $\flat$, A $\flat$, and G $\sharp$, followed by a fermata. Bass clef has a half note G $\sharp$.

164

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

168

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

171

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

175

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 175-178. Pno. 1 (bass clef) has a whole rest in measure 175, followed by a half note G2 in measure 176, and a half note F2 in measure 177. Pno. 2 (treble and bass clefs) has a whole rest in measure 175, followed by a half note G2 in measure 176, and a half note F2 in measure 177.

179

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 179-181. Pno. 1 (bass clef) has a whole rest in measure 179, followed by a half note G2 in measure 180, and a half note F2 in measure 181. Pno. 2 (treble and bass clefs) has a whole rest in measure 179, followed by a half note G2 in measure 180, and a half note F2 in measure 181.

182

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 182-185. Pno. 1 (bass clef) has a whole rest in measure 182, followed by a half note G2 in measure 183, and a half note F2 in measure 184. Pno. 2 (treble and bass clefs) has a whole rest in measure 182, followed by a half note G2 in measure 183, and a half note F2 in measure 184.

186

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Detailed description: This system contains measures 186 through 189. Pno. 1 (grand staff) has rests in measures 186-188. In measure 189, the right hand has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. Pno. 2 (grand staff) has rests in measures 186-188. In measure 189, the right hand has a treble clef and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. A large, complex chordal structure is indicated by a series of vertical lines and dots in the right hand of Pno. 2 across measures 186-189.

190

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Detailed description: This system contains measures 190 through 192. Pno. 1 (grand staff) has rests in measures 190-191. In measure 192, the right hand has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. Pno. 2 (grand staff) has rests in measures 190-191. In measure 192, the right hand has a treble clef and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. A large, complex chordal structure is indicated by a series of vertical lines and dots in the right hand of Pno. 2 across measures 190-192.

193

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Detailed description: This system contains measures 193 through 196. Pno. 1 (grand staff) has rests in measures 193-195. In measure 196, the right hand has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. Pno. 2 (grand staff) has rests in measures 193-195. In measure 196, the right hand has a treble clef and a whole note chord of Bb4, D5, and F5. The left hand has a bass clef and a whole note chord of Bb3, D4, and F4. A large, complex chordal structure is indicated by a series of vertical lines and dots in the right hand of Pno. 2 across measures 193-196.

197

Piano score for measures 197-200. The score is for two pianos, Pno. 1 and Pno. 2.

Pno. 1: Bass clef, key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Measures 197-200 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

Pno. 2: Treble and Bass clefs, key signature of two flats. Measure 197 features a complex arpeggiated figure in the treble clef. Measures 198-200 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

201

Piano score for measures 201-204. The score is for two pianos, Pno. 1 and Pno. 2.

Pno. 1: Bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measures 201-204 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

Pno. 2: Treble and Bass clefs, key signature of two flats. Measure 201 features a complex arpeggiated figure in the treble clef. Measures 202-204 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

205

Piano score for measures 205-208. The score is for two pianos, Pno. 1 and Pno. 2.

Pno. 1: Bass clef, key signature of two flats. Measures 205-208 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

Pno. 2: Treble and Bass clefs, key signature of two flats. Measure 205 features a complex arpeggiated figure in the treble clef. Measures 206-208 show sustained notes in the left hand and rests in the right hand.

209

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 209-212. Pno. 1 has a single note in the bass clef. Pno. 2 has a complex texture with a large chord in the treble and a single note in the bass.

213

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 213-217. Pno. 1 has a single note in the bass clef. Pno. 2 has a complex texture with a large chord in the treble and a single note in the bass.

218

Pno. 1

Pno. 2

Measures 218-219. Pno. 1 has a single note in the bass clef. Pno. 2 has a complex texture with a large chord in the treble and a single note in the bass.

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