

THEMES AND VARIATIONS

A stylized illustration of a coastal scene. In the foreground, large, dark blue waves with white foam are crashing. The middle ground shows a calm sea with a single white sailboat on the horizon. The background is a lush forest of tall, dark green evergreen trees. The sky is a deep teal color with white, fluffy clouds and numerous small, dark birds flying. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

JAMES NEVIUS

On The Blue Danube (Outside Bratislava)

One of my earliest musical mentors, Richard Trythall, passed away in 2022, and this song is dedicated to him. In the 1960s and 70s, Trythall composed a number of experimental pieces as a part of the "musique concrète" movement, where songs are often sound collages using raw materials -- usually sound recordings from a diverse array of materials. (If you aren't familiar with this facet of classical music but are a fan of the Beatles, you know musique concrète from "Revolution #9.")

This piece isn't exactly true musique concrète, but it does feature a sample of the famous Strauss waltz, The Blue Danube. I took the sample from a recording in the Library of Congress, ca. 1910, and extracted just a few musical phrases, which are layered over a droning synthesized backing track that never wavers from a D Minor chord. The effect is supposed to be trance-like. About halfway through, Strauss gives way to a motif played on the Erhu, which is intended to evoke the Ottoman siege of Vienna.



Imaginary Landscape 6C

This work is heavily inspired by the work of John Cage and the Fluxus movement. The notation for this piece is a set of instructions, as follows:

Take Pachelbel's Canon in D Major and select random bars based on how much their waveforms appeal to you. Do this without listening to the music.

Reverse some of those clips so that they play backwards.

Layer these forward and backward clips on top of each other, switching at random intervals. Again, use the felicity of the waveforms as your guide.

End after exactly 4 minutes and 0 seconds.

You may create this piece yourself with a simple DAW and a download of Pachelbel's Canon. I'd love to hear yours.

'Ainakea (Theme)

This piece was written as a short theme to introduce each act of my play 'Ainakea, a re-telling of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard set on the island of Maui. As of summer 2026, this is being expanded into an entire soundtrack. Stay tuned!



Antarctica Stops Here

I was lucky enough to visit Antarctica over two decades ago -- hence the nostalgia -- and much of what I saw then is changing under the pressures of a rapidly warming earth. As noted in The Guardian: "Melting ice around Antarctica will cause a rapid slowdown of a major global deep ocean current by 2050 that could alter the world's climate for centuries and accelerate sea level rise, according to scientists behind new research. The research suggests if greenhouse gas emissions continue at today's levels, the current in the deepest parts of the ocean could slow down by 40% in only three decades. This, the scientists said, could generate a cascade of impacts that could push up sea levels, alter weather patterns and starve marine life of a vital source of nutrients."

The composition's title is inspired by a song by the great John Cale, "Antarctica Starts Here" -- but other than that titular homage (and the fact that they're both in the key of F) there's no connection between the songs.

This piece begins with a solo clarinet, which is soon joined by the cello and bass. Throughout the song, that string duo plays a non-repeating pattern of F Bb Dm C, followed by the repeating pattern of Gm Dm Am Eb.

That first clarinet is soon joined by a second clarinet playing counterpoint. Then, in the second iteration, the clarinet lines repeat and are joined by an oboe, and then in the third iteration by a flute, each new instrument adding a different melody, while the previous instruments either continue their original patterns or drop out. Ultimately, by the fourth iteration, there's a bit of dissonance between the flute and clarinet -- an evocation of the cognitive dissonance we all face as people when it comes to the fact that we are hurtling, pell-mell, toward total planetary change.

The fifth and final loop returns to the first clarinet melody, culminating in a crescendo of all the instruments in Eb. The piece purposefully doesn't resolve back to F, which I think leaves the listener with a sense of discomfort.



Tabula Rasa

I wanted to write a song in the style of Meredith Monk or Steve Reich and I wanted to write a song about how hard it seems to be for AI to understand artistic vision. So, I asked an AI program to write me a poem about a robot trying to write a poem. It was better than I expected it would be, but still not great. But then I thought, "Wouldn't this sound better in Italian? Everything sounds more poetic in Italian." So I had Google translate the poem and then I had a computer voice read it as I recorded the music.



Spruce Head, 1884

This piece is a meditation on fog, a common occurrence off the coast of Maine. It begins with a bassoon and double bass mimicking the sound of a foghorn, followed by a motif that is intended to evoke an image of a row of 19th-century schooners working their way through Penobscot Bay in the pea-soup fog. For a brief moment in the middle of the piece, the tune turns slightly more cheerful -- perhaps that fog is lifting? -- before returning to the original motif. If you are familiar with foggy Maine days, you know that some days the fog gives you false hope that it will dissipate before coming back with a vengeance.



The Last Refuge

This piece comments on the price of freedom gained through war; it samples two interviews conducted soon after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. One is a self-described "co-ed" from Texas; this interview was conducted on or around January or February 1942. The other interview, also done in Texas, is a woman sharing her thoughts on the US entry into the war. It was recorded on December 9, 1941, just two days after the attack.

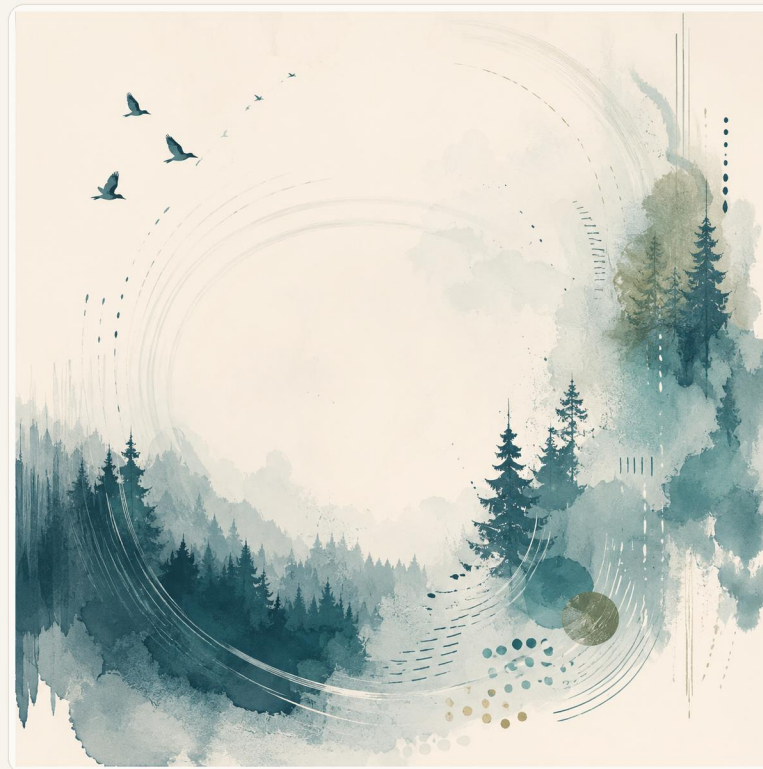
The piece begins with each (edited) interview played separately; then they both loop back and play again, overlapping in the left and right channels, creating a sort of hypnotic drone of voices that is akin to its own instrument. My immediate inspiration for this is Steve Reich's "Different Trains," which is also about World War II and also uses sampled voices as instruments.



Into the Woods, Pt. 1 (Melk Loops)

This piece has many points of inspiration: John Adams (the composer of "Shaker Loops," not the president); Olivier Messiaen, the French composer who attempted to transcribe birdsong onto sheet music; and Steve Reich, who in 1967 wrote "Slow Motion Sound," a conceptual piece wherein he instructed musicians to "very gradually slow down a recorded sound to many times its original length without changing its pitch or timbre at all." At the time, the technology hadn't caught up to Reich's instruction, and the piece remained theoretical, but in 1994, Chris Hughes released "Slow Motion Blackbird," which used recorded birdsong following Reich's instructions. That piece was the immediate influence on mine, though in the end I decided not to slow down any of the bird calls and went off in another direction, layering my recorded birdsong over a slow progression through the eight major chords in a D-minor progression.

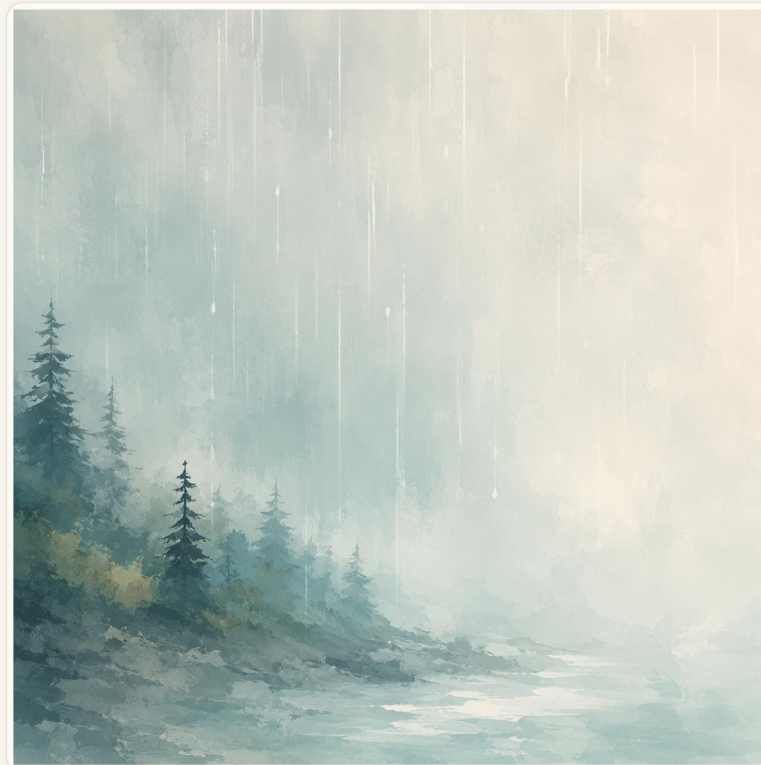
Most of these bird sounds are recorded in a lovely wooded area on the banks of the Danube River in Melk, Austria. (Clever ornithologists might be able to both identify the birds and hear which ones aren't recorded in Melk.) The subtitle is Melk Loops not only because the birdsong repeats (in a mostly random pattern), but also because it was recorded by walking around a loop trail.



Into the Woods, Pt. 2 (Petrichor Loops)

Petrichor is that familiar smell when rain first hits the earth. The driving force in this piece is the sound of falling rain, recorded (mostly) in Maui, Hawaii. The chord progression here is the same as in 'Into the Woods, Pt. 1,' though here it is in reverse.

The idea of "loops" is a major component in contemporary minimalism, so the idea here is not just that the chord progression keeps looping back to the beginning but that the entire piece could be set to play in an endless loop. That might be quite relaxing to try.



Into the Woods, Pt. 3 (Farewell, or Distortions on the Theme by Mendelssohn)

The basis of this piece is "Der Jäger Abschied" by Felix Mendelssohn. I took an LP recording of the piece from the early 20th century and sliced it into sections, using those fragments and motifs as the basis for a new work. Then, I took the original German text of the song, used Google to translate it into English, and had a computer-generated female voice read it. (That voice sounds suspiciously like a well-known Hollywood actress, but it is all A.I.)

