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## Journey to the Center of an Onion: Artist's Statement

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Editor's Note: *Stanislav Kozadayev's article "Journey to the Center of an Onion: Non-Linearity, Composition, and the Layered Account" is intended to be experienced in its fully mediated web-based form. We invite you to access "Journey to the Center of an Onion" online at <http://futuretonality.com/onion>; you may also access the article by visiting the Kaleidoscope website—<http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope>—to link to Stanislav's website and to access the article in scripted form.*

*Keywords: Musical Autoethnography; Non-Linearity; Layered Account; Creativity*

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*I am at the Doing Autoethnography Here and Now conference. Tony Adams, author of *Narrating the Closet* (2011a), is presenting (2011b). He hands out a sheet with questions about autoethnography and joy. I am interested to see what will happen because, having previously read *Narrating the Closet* for an autoethnography class, I failed to see the joy in this work. Nor did I see joy in any of the other readings in my class. The discussion starts. It seems I am not the only one who noticed a dearth of joyful autoethnographies amidst the panoply of works dealing with death, dying, illness, death, abuse, loss, death, discrimination, victimization, death, pain, grief, and death.*

*Tony: "Well, can you write an autoethnography about a birthday party?"  
Someone in the audience: "If someone dies, you can."*

~ ~ ~

*This project initially emerged as a response to my perceived lack of joy in contemporary autoethnographic literature. As the excerpt above illustrates, there is currently a dominance of the tragic in the selection of autoethnographic topics. I therefore chose to explore the contribution to my personal joy, provided by a particular kind of music-making. As part of my creative life, I record solo piano improvisations. The approach is that of completely free improvisation—without constraints of form or purpose. I sit down at the instrument and begin playing. There is no thinking or planning. Sometimes something emerges; other times, I end up with what amounts to an extended warm-up session. I'm not in control. If I try to assume control, the session is almost guaranteed to produce nothing.*

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*Paradoxically, the self has to not be there, in order to speak... It's a strange mode of being—a deep focus somehow mixed with no focus at all.*



The music that emerges is, likewise, a mix of oppositional features, flowing from unmetred to metred, from tentative, monophonic melodic lines to chaotic polyphonic passages to stately, homophonic passages, accompanied by left-hand octave bass. Sometimes the music dwells in that liminal space where meter is so stretched by phrasing that it is difficult to ascertain if the meter is present somewhere beneath the notes that emerge. Likewise, the harmonic structure moves freely between conventional elements, like classical cadences, and dense, chaotic voicings that belong to what I like to imagine as another liminal space—that between the tonal and atonal.

Although my method of piano improvisation is difficult to relate to Western traditions (though calling it “free-improvisation” or “interactive composition” or “real-time composition” typically gets the point across), it finds a direct parallel in the Chinese musical tradition of qin (a type of zither) solos. Stock (2009) writes that qin solos were often played alone “for self-cultivation” and often “attempted to capture occurrences from the emotional world” of the player, without the pressure “to entertain a massed audience” (p. 267). Although both the instruments and the cultures that produced them are very different, the untethered aesthetic of the method—both mine and that of traditional qin playing—often tend to produce sound paintings that dwell in the liminal space between a meditation and an aural EEG. But this music also has a communicative function.

Merriam (1964) points out that one outstanding feature of music “is the fact that [it] provide[s] a vehicle for the expression of ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse.” He also states that music “communicates a certain limited understanding simply by its existence” (p. 223). In this sense, I believe that music may allow me to communicate with myself. That is, the communicative function of music may literally communicate—to my conscious mind—emotions that are present either only subconsciously or possibly only in the emergent musical forms themselves (there is no way for me to know).

Because music is a non-discursive form of communication, I believe that translating it into discursive form presents special challenges to the illusion of authorial authority. I therefore chose to present the project in digital form, in a format that would make explicit two hallmarks of autoethnography: non-linearity and the co-construction of meaning by author and reader. The body of the paper is therefore presented as a collection of free-floating fragments, each fragment not occupying an assigned place in the narrative, but existing in a relationship of dynamic feedbacks with other fragments (each with its own references and accompanying micro-composition). Additionally, I present a case study of one of my own real-time compositions, with analysis

of both the process of improvisation and the several layers of meanings the composition represents.

The format of the project thus makes Rambo's (1995) already fragmented "layered account" fully non-linear. More importantly, the project is dependent on the reader to construct the narrative, as without the reader's input the fragments remain both blank and silent. This makes explicit the co-construction of both meaning and identity. The electronic format also allows the reader to experience the co-construction of another (non-discursive) layer of meaning, as the musical fragments accompanying the textual fragments also depend on the reader to trigger them.

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"I want us not to neglect the ways that autoethnography can benefit from music." (Ellis & Bartlett, 2009, Kindle Location 478)

"My intention here is thus not only to theorize about music, but to theorize through music." (Attali, 1977/2011, p. 4)

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