

# JOEL BALDWIN

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## RESEARCH STATEMENT AND PROPOSAL (February 2024)

Following the completion of a DPhil in Music at the University of Oxford last year, I continued work for constituent colleges of the university (where I have taught since 2016) as an external lecturer and tutor. I was recently appointed Stipendiary Lecturer in Music at St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, where I now teach composition on a part-time basis. I also continue to teach a range of subjects for the Faculty of Music more widely—modules ranging from 'Musical Thought and Scholarship', which covers topics on specific areas of critical theory in relation to musicology (Barthes' 'The Grain of the Voice', for example), to subjects such as 'The History of Electronic Music', which deals with methodological approaches to social theory (Actor-Network Theory, for example) alongside overviews of technological and aesthetic developments. I have also supervised undergraduate dissertations and ethnographic research projects. Covering different areas of scholarship in this way lends itself to the research I continue to do through writing and interdisciplinary composition projects. As a composer with significant music technology and studio-based experience, a considerable amount of my work as a lecturer, researcher, and practitioner covers areas of technology, modern cultural developments in music and musical thought, and twentieth-century repertoire, including the experimental, political, and musicological movements over the last century that relate to technological advancements.

Additional roles undertaken over the last six years for the Faculty of Music at the University of Oxford and various other performance spaces and festivals include: devising and staging an opera for students from the Faculty as part of the Opera and Music Theatre module; convening concert series, workshops and conferences at the JdP Music Building and other university performance spaces; composing works for a range of interdisciplinary projects involving and funded by organisations and university-based research networks such as TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), DANSOX (Dance Scholarship Oxford), SciPo (Science & Poetry Network), MASH (Music at St Hilda's events), LHN (Liveness, Hybridity & Noise), and EXPO (an experimental music initiative utilising new technologies); admissions marking; undergraduate collections exam marking; performance adjudication; and the management of resources in the JdP Concert Hall, 1532 Performing Arts Centre, and Ludlow Assembly Rooms, which has led to programming and curation roles within festivals such as the Ludlow Piano Festival for which I am Co-Artistic Director. This practical and wide-ranging organisational experience—alongside related skills in website development and management, marketing, and promoting projects within the media and online will benefit future research projects significantly.

My DPhil research (thesis and portfolio of compositions submitted in January 2022, available to view at [www.joelbaldwin.com/dphil](http://www.joelbaldwin.com/dphil)) explores the potential of new music theatre to: communicate through noise (informational and audiovisual); present complex, intertextual, layered, or non-linear narratives; express ideas of melancholy, madness, indifference and irony; and integrate multimedia with music, drama, dance, or other on-stage disciplines to create a hypermedial performance space. As a result of the focus in my critical writing on Louis Andriessen's and Hal Hartley's 'film opera', *La Commedia* (2004–08), Dante's *Comedy*, and other explorations of literature and art, have become important sources of inspiration for my own narratives in research, writing, and composition. The research undertaken (both written and practice-based) on hypermedial, interdisciplinary, and intertextual works of music lead me now to a post-doctoral position in which I can expand on these areas of enquiry. My recent research points to ideas of noise, silence, melancholy, and reflections of mood disorders in sound, language, and the breakdown of music/speech, but I am keen to explore such ideas in wider contexts of politics, society, and culture.

As an active composer, recent commissions include a highly-immersive ‘vocalic’ opera for Konscht Maschinn (a project that won the Fedora Generali 2020 Opera Prize Popular Vote) and an invitation to compose a centenary celebration piece, *Fish*, for Bristol Opera. I have composed pieces for Ensemble Klang, Explore Ensemble, CHROMA, Masters Ensemble, Villiers Quartet, RCM Orchestra and various other ensembles, as well as pieces featuring a variety of international soloists such as Micheala Riener, Julia Mintzer, Laura Bohn and Maki Sekiya. Please visit [www.joelbaldwin.com/dphil](http://www.joelbaldwin.com/dphil) to access the media and scores associated with the five compositions submitted along with my DPhil thesis as an example of recent work and research. Much of my work as a composer (particularly within the operas I have written, such as *The Beginning of an Idea*) deals with themes of melancholy/severe depression, the personal experience and inner lives of artists, speech and the philosophy of language, and ideas of translation, intertext, noise, and silence.

This focus on multidisciplinary research covering areas of musicology, technology, art and culture, psychology, aesthetics and philosophy—and the variety of academic and administrative positions I have taken up over recent years as a doctoral student (see CV for a full list of roles: [www.joelbaldwin.com/cv\\_joel-baldwin](http://www.joelbaldwin.com/cv_joel-baldwin))—has led to a heightened awareness of the need for efficient teamwork and a collaborative approach within university departments, especially when undertaking projects that cross subject boundaries and involve many interdisciplinary stakeholders. I strive to work well independently and within a team, always looking for collaborative opportunities and potential partnerships. This outlook and skillset will fit well with this role as a postdoctoral researcher and for projects spanning disciplines requiring clear thought, communication, and planning.

My research interests are informed by themes of acoustics and melancholia in poetic contexts that inform socio-cultural developments of these themes. When considering language within artistic, musical, and sociological contexts over the last century—especially given the rise of technological influences—dantean landscapes have provided a useful point of departure. For example, towards the end of the *Divine Comedy*, language begins to lose the power to express the fullness, or true essence, of Dante’s culminating vision in Paradise: ‘A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa / *Here force failed my high fantasy*’ (Paradiso xxxiii, 142). This transition—from ‘linguistic intercourse’ to a ‘mental reading’ or ‘watching of the Divine Mind’, as Umberto Eco puts it—points to a failure of Dante’s elaborate attempts to rediscover a ‘universal forma locutionis of Eden’<sup>1</sup> in the *Comedy*. It takes an epic journey of intertextual complexity for Dante to be able to frame this transition—from the nuance of purgatorial language to the ineffability of paradisiacal light—with meaning. Many composers over the course of the last century have also explored ways in which to free themselves from the rules-based language systems of tonality and other long-established musical forms of musical phrasing and dialogue for a variety of creative, political, and cultural reasons. Perhaps one of the most striking ways in which some composers have sought this freedom—from the bonds of tonal grammar in particular—is to use silence, stillness, or a very low-volume control of musicians and musical material to present ‘essences’<sup>2</sup> of meaning through sound, avoiding the need for formal structures to be made apparent to the listener. In such pieces, the political act of listening or emotional state of the listener is as important to ‘the work’ as the function of the score and the proposed auditory elements comprising the composition. The other side of this phenomenon is the use of noise. Technology has been at the forefront of both developments; as a reaction to and as a tool for exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> Eco, U. & Weaver, W. (1998). *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (New York, Columbia University Press), pp. 23–51.

<sup>2</sup> Composers such as John Cage (*Silent prayer*, 1948; 4’33”, 1952; 0’00” (1962), and *One*<sup>3</sup>, 1989) and Morton Feldman (*String Quartet No. 2*, 1983; *For Philip Guston*, 1984, *For Bunita Marcus*, 1985)—and more recently: Charlie Sdraulig (*hush*, 2011-12; *close*, 2012) and Michael Baldwin (*4 Echoes: whistle, whisper, gasp, silence*, 2016; *silence/stillness/essence*, 2016), for example—have explored ideas of silence in this way through their music and writings. Morton Feldman’s responses to the compositions and writings of Cage—and reactions to the philosophy of Zen Buddhism and Kierkegaard as oppositions are of relevance to this discussion too. There are, of course, also numerous comparable examples I could give in relation to noise and technology, some of which are discussed in my doctoral thesis.

Similarly, in my own music in recent years (centred around a portfolio of pieces that accompanied my doctoral thesis), I have explored the breakdown of creative impetuses (*The Beginning of an Idea*), the simplification and distillation of language (*FLUX*), and the effect of intertextual noise, literal noise, and silence (*Grim's Ditch*, a study in melancholy), the use of technology in composition and love contexts, and wider ideas around the failure of linguistic expression and tensions in exercises of translation (*Life Piles Up*, *Jacinto Chiclana*). All of this work has been closely related to an exploration of societal depression—its impact on composers, writers, and artists—and is closely linked to my thesis ('Melancholia, Intertextuality, and Noise in Louis Andriessen's *La Commedia*'), which explores the parallels between Dante and Andriessen, and the way in which highly intertextual artistic expression points to ideas of noise, technological agency, melancholia, negative space, and a search for silence.

I intend to develop this research (both written and practice-based) to find deeper connections between the proliferation of expressions of noise and silence in contemporary music, and the way this is represented in society through technology, politics, and mental health. What drives composers to use noise and silence as tools for expression? How are these ideas treated in music and what are their functions for composers and their audiences? What are the societal effects of encouraging a deeper engagement with silence and noise?

Just as silence and noise are often seen as antithetical to both the composition process and the listening experience, so too is it seen often as a barrier to well-being—as if the technology and societal perspective from which they come are negatively influencing lives. However, these concepts operate within—and alongside—physical and emotional experiences comprising complex soundscapes of information, music, and expression. Physical realities of sound, a perceived lack of sound, or perceived experiences of intertextual noise (often resulting in severe emotional responses) exist in relation to political and cultural realities. I believe there is a lot of research that needs to be done to explore these relationships.

Whilst personal case studies to date have concentrated on composers—and, by extension, musicians and artists—this is not a prerequisite for my main research output, and I expect to discuss and develop ideas in partnership with an organisation and, ideally, within the context of a wider team of scholars across related subject areas. I believe this interdisciplinary approach through research, writing, and practical outputs will be the most successful way of connecting to relevant scholarship, exploring new collaborative opportunities with other researchers, and disseminating outputs across a suitably diverse range of contexts.



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