Splendid Disarray: The Music of Andrew McKenna Lee

Nina Berman

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SPLENDID DISARRAY:
THE MUSIC OF ANDREW MCKENNA LEE

by

Nina Berman

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, The City University of New York

2018
Splendid Disarray: The Music of Andrew McKenna Lee

by

Nina Berman

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

SPLENDID DISARRAY:
THE MUSIC OF ANDREW MCKENNA LEE

by

Nina Berman

Advisor: Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

The music of composer Andrew McKenna Lee spans multiple genres and styles, and does so in a way that draws parallels to the New York City downtown new music scene as well as the progressive and experimental rock scenes. These connections are especially apparent when looking at his 2013 song cycle The Knells, written for Lee’s ensemble, also called The Knells, which he assembled expressly for the purpose of performing this work. The band consists of three female singers singing without vibrato, backed by a rock group, plus percussion and string quartet. Lee deploys these forces to create a sound world that spans the enormous gulf between his varied musical interests.

This paper explores and classifies Lee’s music, taking into account his background as a classical and rock guitarist, his knowledge of the classical repertoire, a great love of popular music, including progressive rock, and his lifelong struggle with depression. The Knells as a whole will be analyzed through the lens of Disability Studies, and this paper will show how Lee has composed his depression into the music, drawing upon the influences of minimalism, today’s current new music scene, Renaissance and Baroque vocal writing techniques, and the progressive rock traditions of the concept album and fusing classical archetypes with rock music.
First, this dissertation offers a biography of the composer, detailing important childhood moments and family life, as well as his educational background and important career achievements. Second, I analyze *The Knells* and point out connections to popular music genres such as progressive rock, experimental rock, and jazz, and I demonstrate that his music may be classified equally well as both progressive rock and new music. I also draw parallels between Lee’s cycle and the classical music that he loves, and contextualize Lee’s group within today’s classical and popular music scenes. Last, I offer a detailed analysis of the ways in which listeners and players may track Lee’s depression through *The Knells*, ranging from Lee’s reliance on straight-tone singing to the harmonies he employs and musical motifs that bind the song cycle. Through examining the composer and his music, I demonstrate that Lee’s depression has opened up a creative and productive space for him, and that he has and continues to make important contributions to both classical and popular music.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank some of the many people who have made this project possible: thank you to Dr. Stephanie Jensen-Moulton for her unwavering support, creativity, insight, and forthrightness, and for pushing this paper in the right direction; to Dr. Mark Spicer for his eye for detail and for allowing me to borrow a book for what I said would be a week, but which turned into a year; to Dr. Jeffrey Taylor for his kindness; and to Dr. Shaugn O’Donnell for his thoughtfulness, expediency, and humanity throughout a process that can at times feel endlessly bureaucratic.

Thank you also to my parents, Jed Berman and Dr. Gayle Hershkop Berman, to whom this project has been very important, for supporting me and inspiring me to complete it. I would also like to thank my wonderful partner Galen Brown for wearing many hats from editor to copyist to housekeeper, and for his wholehearted support, both personal and professional.

A big thank you to my fellow Knells members, both past and present: Charlotte Mundy, Blythe Gaisser-Levitt, Joe Higgins, Paul Orbell, Jeff Gretz, Jude Traxler, Amanda Gregory, Katya Powder, and Mike McCurdy. And I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Andrew McKenna Lee for his great generosity in allowing me to write about his life and music, as well as for his consistent kindness, sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and sincerity as a musician, friend, and colleague.
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Andrew McKenna Lee is an American composer, guitarist, recording engineer, and music faculty member of The College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York, who was born on April 13, 1974. His compositions encompass multiple styles, drawing parallels especially to the NYC downtown new music scene as well as the progressive and experimental rock scenes. These connections are all apparent when looking at his 2013 song cycle *The Knells*, written for his ensemble of the same name. The group comprises three female singers singing Renaissance-style polyphony, backed by an ensemble comprising two guitars, bass, drums, plus percussion and string quartet. Lee deploys these forces to create a sound world that spans the enormous gulf between his varied musical interests.

Figure 1.1 Andrew McKenna Lee.\(^1\)
Photo by Jeffrey Herman.

\(^1\) All images used with permission.
This dissertation explores and classifies Lee’s music, taking into account his background as a classical and rock guitarist, his knowledge of the classical repertoire, a great love of popular music, including progressive rock, and his lifelong struggle with depression. This chapter will provide biographical details about Lee’s life, and especially the beginnings of his depression, in order to contextualize his music as a whole, and *The Knells*, specifically. I analyze the cycle through the lens of Disability Studies, and show how Lee has composed his depression into the music, drawing upon the influences of minimalism, today’s new music scene, Renaissance and Baroque vocal writing techniques, and the progressive rock traditions of the concept album and fusing classical archetypes with rock music.\(^2\)

Although now Lee splits his time between Brooklyn, New York and Albany, New York with his wife, singer/composer Molly Thompson, he is a southerner at heart. Lee was born into an upper-middle class family in South Carolina, and spent the early part of his childhood in downtown Charleston. His family then moved to a beautiful estate on Wadmalaw Island, just outside of the city, when he was around nine years old; Lee’s mother and older sister, Jennie, were serious horseback riders, and moving to a more rural area allowed them to keep horses at home rather than board them at stables, and his mother still keeps horses today. As a teenager in a rural area, music was very important to Lee, and he spent a great deal of time walking around and listening to and absorbing music on his cassette Walkman. His family was moderately musical, although his parents were not professional musicians. His mother, Donna Lee, a small

\(^2\) While biographical analysis may not work for every piece or composer, in this specific case, Lee has so clearly written his depression into the text and music that to ignore this part of the analysis would be to miss out on an important area of exploration. In the case of *The Knells*, the biographical analysis dovetails neatly with the musical analysis and really must be included in order to present a complete picture of the piece. In the case of a modern composer who is partly rooted in the avant-garde downtown scene, who writes and performs his own music and text, and who has spoken openly about the ways in which his lived experience is channeled through his work, it would be remiss to neglect this aspect of the analysis.
business owner, had some training as a classical pianist when she was young, but Lee doesn’t recall her playing very much, and Lee’s father, Henry J. Lee, Jr., was an ex-marine who worked in the family business, a beer distribution company started by Lee’s grandfather called Henry J. Lee Distributors. Lee describes his father as “a good, musical guitarist and singer,” who mostly loved 70s folk-rock and related genres.³

³ Lee, email message to author on November 11, 2016.
Lee began playing the guitar at age 11 in 1985. His first guitar, borrowed from his grandmother, was a steel-string acoustic, and his first teacher was his father. Typical of someone who grew up steeped in pop culture of the 1980s, Lee really wanted to play electric rather than acoustic, and moved on to doing so as soon as possible. Lee says that while he took private lessons during these early years, he “did a lot of self-teaching,” and “didn’t study formal, classical guitar until [he] was well into college.”

4 Lee describes himself as mostly interested in popular music as a kid, and counts Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Deep Purple, U2, Rush, King

4 Ibid.
Crimson, Soundgarden, Metallica, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young as some of his favorite groups during his childhood and high school years.

Figure 1.4. Lee (right) with close childhood friend (and fellow composer and Princeton alumnus) Nathan Michel (left) in approximately 1979. Photographer unknown.
Just one week after Lee’s thirteenth birthday in 1987, his father was killed in a car accident. “I was kind of numb with shock, I think. I knew I had lost something big, but I didn’t know how to process it, really. My whole family was devastated by my father’s loss, especially my mom. My [paternal] grandfather, hadn’t smoked a cigarette in 35 years prior to my dad’s passing, but within 6 months of the event, he broke out into lung cancer and passed away, too.”

Lee talks about feeling that his life was full of richness despite his enormous loss, and says that he did not feel especially “damaged” or even affected in a deep way by this event until he began

5 Lee, email message to author on October 5, 2017.
to truly process it later in life. In fact, Lee says “the loss of my father notwithstanding, I have been blessed with abundance [both material and otherwise] in my life, which I am both aware of and grateful for.” This lack of processing his loss, however, and Lee’s need to separate himself from his unhappiness crops up often in Lee’s music, and will be explored further in Chapter 3, wherein the music is given close reading through the framework of Disability Studies.

It was around the age of 15 that Lee first began to notice his depressive tendencies, saying that “at the time, they were just phases of feeling withdrawn and morose. A lot of music came out of those experiences, though. In spite of occasional bouts of depression, I largely remember high school fondly. I played the guitar a lot, had great friends, and after a relatively brief period of conflict with my mom when I was 15, managed to get a significant amount of autonomy and independence over my life.” Despite this, there is a history of depression in Lee’s family stemming from his mother’s side, and his father’s death undoubtedly had more of an effect than he realized at the time. Both Lee’s mother and his maternal grandfather struggled with depression, and his sister has, in Lee’s opinion, dealt with depression much more directly than he ever has, having been on anti-depressants and in therapy for various intervals between the ages of 18 and 40.

At the age of 16, at the suggestion of his mother, Lee enrolled in a summer guitar course at the North Carolina School of the Arts, and of that experience, Lee says his “eyes opened to the contrapuntal and textural possibilities of the classical guitar.” Lee recalls that while he became engaged with guitar playing through this summer course, his interests still mostly fell within the realm of rock and popular music until he discovered guitarists Leo Kottke and “the brilliant

6 Lee, email message to author on November 4, 2017.
7 Ibid.
8 Rinzel (2012).
performer and recording artist” Michael Hedges, with whose musicianship Lee remained especially enthralled throughout his college years. During these later high school years after the summer course, Lee talks about writing complex, instrumental guitar music, but did not at this time have the necessary skills to write more long form pieces. Hedge’s work is, in part, what prompted Lee to pursue composition studies as an undergraduate: “While in high school, I consumed everything he [Hedges] did in his relatively short life, and upon learning that he had studied composition at the Peabody Conservatory, I decided that I, too, would go to college and study to become a composer.” Lee credits his family with his forging a creative path for himself, noting that his family’s “emotional and financial support in getting a world class education essentially empowered [him] to [choose this career and] make this…life choice.”

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Lee, in email message to author on November 4, 2017.
Lee did indeed go on to study composition at Carnegie Mellon University starting in 1992 under Leonardo Balada and Nancy Galbraith. It was during his CMU years that Lee’s interest in classical music took off, and where he began to truly compose, writing the first classical style piece he considers to be of any quality, a set of short piano variations entitled, simply, *Theme and Variations*. Of those years, Lee says that he “disavowed pop and rock music for a while,” and focused almost solely on classical repertoire, especially contemporary music, building his arsenal as a composer, citing Steve Reich’s *Octet* and works by Stravinsky,
Shostakovich, Ravel, Dutilleux, and Lutoslawski as especially influential. He also spent much time with the work of Steve Tibbetts, and, in fact, cites Tibbetts’s musical sophistication and deft fusion of multiple styles as one his biggest influences when it came to The Knells. Lee mentions that Pink Floyd is one of the few bands that he continued to love and enthusiastically listen to throughout these more classically-focused years, and their psychedelic imprint on him is still palpable in his music. Reich and Pink Floyd’s impact, in particular, will be explored further in the next chapter, where Lee’s most important influences are discussed in more detail. It was also during his undergraduate years that Lee began to seriously study classical guitar and hone his technique under teacher Jim Ferla, although Lee says he always considered his guitar studies secondary to his compositional studies. Also, during these undergraduate years, Lee’s family underwent a big change as his mother remarried to a man named Robert R. Cox, with whom Lee enjoys a close relationship.

After receiving his BFA in 1997, Lee began graduate work in 1998 at the Manhattan School of Music, studying composition under Richard Danielpour. He also spent one or two semesters studying guitar under David Leisner. Of these lessons, Lee admits that “David was a wonderful teacher, but I was a bad student. I would show up to lessons unprepared! He was frustrated with me, and I can’t say I blame him.” Lee talks about feeling distracted by life in New York City, but it is also worth noting observations that Lee has made about this period in his life when prompted to discuss his depressive tendencies: “My twenties and thirties were...decades largely marred by depression and deep, existential loneliness. Until recently, the connection between my father’s death and the despondency I felt during what were supposed to be the ‘best years of my life’ always seemed specious. On paper it seemed plausible — likely, even — that

12 Lee, email message to author on November 11, 2016.
the two were related, but I could never make a clear connection between the numb, vacuous place in my soul that framed my father’s absence and the compulsive negative feelings that defined the emotional holding cell of my young adulthood.”

Given the knowledge Lee now has about his emotional state, perhaps unpreparedness for lessons is understandable. These ideas of compulsion and an “emotional holding cell” are further explored in Chapter 3, in which Lee’s texts are analyzed in relation to his music, both of which are a direct outgrowth of Lee’s depression. Lee talks about being completely immersed in classical music and continuing to discover contemporary music during his time at MSM, although these years appear to be a bit of a blur for him, for reasons that are clear. After his graduation with a Masters of Music in 2000, Lee acquired a job working at Boosey & Hawkes in New York City, and recalls this time as a period of “lost years,” despite his writing a large orchestral work and having it premiered by the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. It was also during this time that Lee began to write guitar music again for the first time since he was in high school.

In 2003, Lee commenced Ph.D. work at Princeton University, working with advisor Steven Mackey and studying guitar under Laura Oltman. This was a pivotal moment for Lee, because it was at this time that he came back around to rock music, and was finally able to “admit to [him]self that [he] loved it,” despite his classical training and by-now deep roots in the classical music scene in New York City. Lee remembers receiving a wonderful Christmas gift from his sister Jennie that year: she gave him a copy of the recently released live triple DVD, entitled *How the West was Won*, of Led Zeppelin’s 1972 US tour. Lee feels that watching it

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13 Lee, email message to author on October 5, 2017.
14 Ibid.
allowed him to “kind of just fall in love [with rock music] all over again.”¹⁵ That same year, Lee also won a one-month artist residency fellowship from the MacDowell Colony, another one-month residency from Yaddo, and attended the Aspen Music Festival on scholarship. 2003 is also the year that Lee won the first of his three Composer Assistance Program (CAP) awards from the American Music Center, the other two coming later in 2006 and 2008.

Figure 1.7. Lee in 2002, the year before he won the first of his three CAP awards. Photo by Jeffrey Herman.

Lee’s time at Princeton was fruitful for reasons other than winning awards and his personal development, though. In 2004, The Brentano String Quartet was the quartet-in-

¹⁵ Ibid.
residence, and as a result of the connection Lee made with them, the quartet performed a revised version of his 1998 work *Celestial Sketchbook*. And these Ph.D. years were productive even during what was ostensibly time off: just prior to beginning his coursework, Lee attended the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival in 2003, where he arranged his solo guitar piece *Gravity and Air* for the chamber music group eighth blackbird, and to this day, Lee maintains that their rendition was “easily one of the best live performances” he’s ever had of his work.\(^{16}\) That same year, Lee won an ASCAP Young Composers award, which he managed to parlay into a performance of his solo guitar work *Arabescata* at Zankel Hall in 2007, when one of the ASCAP award panel members, composer Derek Bermel, joined the board of the American Composers Orchestra and invited Lee to perform on their “Composers Out Front!” Series.

In 2009, Lee released two CDs comprising a mix of his own compositions and works by other composers: the first, his debut, *Gravity and Air*, was released on New Amsterdam Records and met with critical praise; in fact, it was named one of the “Top Ten Best Classical Albums” by Time Out Chicago. The second, an independently-released EP entitled *Solar/Electric*, was also lauded, garnering notable praise from composer Steve Reich, who found Lee’s interpretation of his work *Electric Counterpoint* “a magnificent performance beautifully recorded.”\(^{17}\) The content of these two albums showcases Lee’s affinity for the downtown NYC scene, as well as his interest in genre-blending: his *Scordatura Suite*, which appears on *Gravity and Air* “explores parallels between the heavy ornamentation frequently found in Baroque music (especially the keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti) and the heavily improvised, blues-influenced playing of

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\(^{16}\) Ibid.  
\(^{17}\) Lee (2014).
great rock guitarists like Jimi Hendrix.” This interest in hybridization has continued to be one of Lee’s hallmarks, and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In fact, just a year later, Lee found himself sharing a stage with Billy Idol and Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols, playing his own arrangements of tunes by Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie. This concert was curated by contemporary street artist and graphic designer Shepard Fairey, with whom Lee has been friends since childhood: before Lee’s family relocated to Wadmalaw Island, the two lived across the street from one another in downtown Charleston. Given Lee’s interest in popular music and rock, Fairey invited Lee to do the arrangements and perform.

Figure 1.8. Album art on “Gravity and Air.”
Artwork and album design by Bruce Zeines.

18 Lee (2017).
More recent events include commissions in 2014 by the Charleston Symphony Orchestra for their Magnetic South concert series, and the American Composers Orchestra. The work resulting from the ACO commission, an orchestration and realization of composer Ian Williams’s work, *Clear Image*, was premiered that year at Carnegie Hall. In 2017, Lee was commissioned by the Albany Symphony Orchestra’s in-house new music ensemble, Dogs of Desire, for the 2017 American Music Festival.

In addition to his work as a well-respected guitarist and composer, Lee also runs a studio, Still Sound Music, out of branches in his two homes in Brooklyn and Albany, between which he
travels back and forth depending upon his performance schedule and teaching responsibilities. He has also done extensive work with editing and mixing for discs released on Brooklyn’s New Amsterdam Records, including for David T. Little and Newspeak, Daniel Wohl and Transit New Music, and William Brittelle and the American Contemporary Music Ensemble. The connections he has forged in his professional life speak to how we might contextualize Lee’s music, and this is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

The focus of this dissertation, however, is on one of Lee’s most recent projects: his band The Knells, of which I am member, and the self-titled song cycle that comprises our eponymous 2013 album. Similar to the ethnomusicologist who embarks upon fieldwork that results in what Jack D. Douglas describes as “extensive [and] representative” work, I, by way of my close proximity to the subject matter, have been able to acquire much information about the band, the music, the composer, and other details that draw a clearer picture of the inner workings of the group, how the music has evolved, and the meaning behind the song cycle discussed herein. My opinions about, and interpretations of, the work may be biased, but these opinions have not influenced the work, itself: at the time when I first met the composer and was recruited to sing with the band in 2012, the music was already fully composed and notated. Furthermore, given the analytical nature of this project, my opinions about the quality of the work are irrelevant: the song cycle speaks for itself, as shown through the following chapters.

Lee first developed his idea for The Knells while on a multi-hour solo hike through Joshua Tree National Park in the spring of 2010. He had just performed his piece Five Refractions of a Prelude by Bach as part of the Green Umbrella series, under the auspices of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and had received a poor review from critic Mark Swed, who implied

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that Lee was not truly deserving of the opportunity he had received. Lee began to reflect on his feelings of “struggling with impostor syndrome through most of [his career in classical music]. The negative review seemed to reflect what I had always suspected about myself.” Harking back to his days of listening to cassettes and wandering around marshy Wadmalaw Island, Lee outfitted himself with an iPod and gave in to his love of and kaleidoscopic views of music, coming up with an idea for a musical adventure that would break free of the strict boundaries between classical and popular music he had been dealing with up to that point. Lee writes of this trip:

I have always had a deep connection with nature, and hiking in the wilderness has often served as a cure for my spiritual and emotional ailments. I didn’t see another soul for six hours that day, and while I was out in the midst of that immense nowhere, I was listening to some of my favorite rock records on my iPod. It was a cathartic experience for me, one in which I realized that as an artist, one owes no allegiance to anybody other than himself. There are no rules: life is short, boundaries are illusions, and when it comes to music, one should do what he wants to do without apology, compromise, or fear. For me, that realization meant that I needed to get back to my rock roots. I came up with the idea for The Knells — the instrumentation, the approach, production, and most everything else — that day.

Upon his return, Lee wanted to press ahead right away. He managed to quickly assemble a trio of female singers to record early demos of three tunes before he took off for another

20 Swed (2010).
21 Lee, email message to the author on October 5, 2017.
22 Lee (2014).
composers’ residency. The following year, in 2011, the composers collective of which Lee was currently a member, Random Access Music, partnered with a contemporary music ensemble. With this group, plus drummer Mike McCurdy, who was a close friend at the time, and McCurdy’s friend Joe Higgins on bass, Lee tried to perform “Spiral Knells,” the last song in his cycle, at a small Queens venue. He describes what ensued as one of “the two most demoralizing performances I’ve ever had.” He talks about how it almost made him feel like giving up, but he ultimately decided he needed to forge ahead and see out his vision.

By 2012, Lee truly felt ready to put together what he thought of as the final version of his band, holding onto McCurdy and Higgins, but parting with the other musicians. Through McCurdy, Lee was introduced to percussionist Jude Traxler, and he met guitarist Paul Orbell through Higgins, who had seen Orbell playing at the South by Southwest music festival earlier that year. Lee turned to a composer friend from Princeton, Greg Spears, for singer recommendations, and came up with soprano Amanda Gregory to fill the role of mezzo-soprano, and contralto Katya Powder to fill the role of alto. Through Gregory, Lee was introduced to soprano Ina Woods, who ended up leaving New York shortly after being recruited, thus Lee contacted this author after receiving a recommendation from Spears and Gregory. By 2012, the group looked the way it does on the debut album that will be discussed in this dissertation: Nina Berman, soprano; Amanda Gregory, mezzo; Katya Powder, alto; Paul Orbell, guitar; Andrew McKenna Lee, guitar; Jude Traxler, percussion and electronics, Mike McCurdy, drums, and Joe Higgins, bass. In February 2014, however, the personnel changed, as singers Powder and Gregory left the group. The role of mezzo was filled by soprano Charlotte Mundy, who Lee met after stumbling across her website, and the role of alto was filled by mezzo-soprano Kate.

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23 Lee, email message to the author on October 5, 2017.
Maroney, both of whom work extensively within the downtown and Brooklyn new music scene, and as professional choristers. In mid-2015, Maroney left the group due to scheduling demands, as well as a musical mismatch—the alto part of both *The Knells* and *Knells II* sits quite low—and mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaissert-Levitt stepped in after Lee saw her perform and contacted her. Gaissert-Levitt is primarily an opera singer, with deep ties to the new music scene and extensive and various opera credits to her name. The last and most recent change has been the exit of drummer Mike McCurdy, whose role was filled by drummer Jeff Gretz, who is most known for his work as member of multiple touring rock bands. It is with this personnel that The Knells records, performs, and functions currently.

![Figure 1.10 Band Personnel Chart](image-url)
Figure 1.11. The Knells in a photo shoot just prior to the 2013 album release concert at Subculture in New York City. From left to right: Joe Higgins, Andrew McKenna Lee, Nina Berman, Mike McCurdy, Amanda Gregory, Jude Traxler, Katya Powder, Paul Orbell. Photo by Scott Friedlander.
In addition to the official band members, Lee recruited the Mivos Quartet for the first album and to play on select concerts; however, the quartet is not an official part of The Knells. Further, in an effort to create a more holistic performance experience for audiences, The Knells has often paired with software artist Joshue Ott, who creates swirling, realtime graphic animations to accompany the music at live shows. (Lee has always been attracted to the type of psychedelic designs that Ott creates, as evidenced by the album covers of his 2009 releases, and this affinity shows up again and again, even in references to swirls and spirals in Lee’s texts.)
Last, the website design was done by Peter Wise of Square Candy Design, and album art and the album design were created by Lee’s childhood friend, his across the street neighbor, Shepard Fairey.

In its current incarnation, the band has just released a second album, *Knells II*, that deals with many of the same themes as *The Knells*, but approached differently. Lee is in a different place psychologically, emotionally, musically, and compositionally eight years later than he was when his idea for The Knells first came to him in 2010, and his current artistry reflects such.
Figure 1.14. The Knells in 2017. From left to right, Joe Higgins, Blyther Gaissert-Levitt, Paul Orbell, Nina Berman, Jeff Gretz, Charlotte Mundy, Jude Traxler; kneeling, Andrew McKenna Lee.
Photo by Scott Friedlander.
Figure 1.15a. Album art by Shepard Fairey for *The Knells*. Photo by Andrew McKenna Lee.
In the following chapter, I show that many of the artists and composers mentioned throughout this chapter had a profound influence on Lee’s compositional style, and I classify his music as both progressive rock and new music. Further, through musical analysis, I show the specific ways Lee’s music hybridizes the genres he loves and has studied through his years as a student, composer, engineer, and working musician.
This chapter focuses on aspects of Lee’s group The Knells and their eponymous 2013 album that simultaneously forge connections with classical music and the New York City downtown scene, as well as with the progressive rock scene. Lee himself defines his group as a “post-progressive neo-psychedelic art rock ensemble,” a descriptor that captures the composer’s multi-pronged approach to assembling, writing for, and marketing his ensemble. The Knells exists at the intersection of contemporary progressive rock and New York City’s downtown new music scene, and is an archetype of the sort of group that has come to define the postmodern era: in pop, rock, contemporary classical music, and musical theatre, stylistic boundaries have become blurred.\(^{24}\)

When Lee himself is asked to contextualize The Knells, he refers back to groups from the golden age of progressive rock, specifically citing Yes, King Crimson, and Rush. His group also just as easily fits within the framework of the New York City downtown new music scene,\(^ {25}\) having released their first album on New Amsterdam Records, a label deeply associated with the downtown scene; further, the group has performed at Roulette and with the New Music Bake Sale, and has shared band members with Mantra Percussion at various points. Aside from the band’s sharing personnel with an established downtown outfit and clinging to the scene just by

\(^{24}\text{See the work of John Zorn, Anthony Braxton, Jason Robert Brown, et al.}\)

\(^{25}\text{“This geographic dislocation [of the newly developing downtown scene] resulted in an entire new body of work, so-called “Downtown Music”... – mostly conceptualist and minimalist – [that] made its first public collective splash at New York’s experimental arts space The Kitchen in a widely attended festival called New Music New York. From this moment, the music...had a new...widely used name: New Music.” Gann (1997), 155.}\)
association, Lee's music itself also shares aesthetic qualities with some of the early new music. For example, in *The Knells*, Lee makes heavy use of looping, similar to the phase-shifting work associated with minimalism, and he has no qualms about using guitar distortion to the point of creating what might almost be described as “musical white noise” between songs during live performance, a move we might more readily associate with a figure such as Glenn Branca. *The Knells* draws on both the individualism and reactionary nature of New York City's downtown scene and 1970s progressive rock in very specific ways (noted below), and, aptly, continues to advance the “progress” of Lee’s forebears. For example, like some progressive rock musicians who have come before, Lee looks to minimalism and electronics, looping, and pedalboard effects in his compositions, and relies on a mix of classical-, jazz-, and rock-based compositional techniques. The makeup of Lee's ensemble, too, speaks to his connections to both the classical and rock worlds and his own attitudes about his music: all three singers come out of the classical world, as do the drummer, percussionist, and string quartet; Lee, himself, straddles the classical and rock worlds; and the second guitarist and bassist are dyed-in-the-wool rock/pop session musicians. Last, Lee writes his own texts; it is highly unusual for a classical composer in today's climate to not only write and arrange the music, but also to set his own poetry, in the singer-songwriter tradition.

One of Lee’s most interesting contributions is his expansion of the role of female performers. With only a few notable exceptions, the rock scene, and especially the progressive rock scene, has remained a stalwart boys' club for decades, and Lee has specifically chosen to write for a trio of female singers. This expansion of the role of female performers may also be

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26Throughout this dissertation, “new music” and “downtown” will refer to the experimental and minimalist music that came out of the scene that Kyle Gann and others call the “Downtown Music” scene or the “New Music” scene, and its derivatives. Ibid.
seen as a nod to the very active female participants in the new music scene, many of whom are rightfully, though unusually, as well-known and respected as their male counterparts. Interestingly, only the singers are women, however—all the instrumentalists in the band are men. Lee explains that choosing to write for three female voices as opposed to a single (male or female) lead singer was a conscious choice: “Perhaps it’s because I’m primarily an instrumentalist, but it’s always kind of bugged me that so much of the success of a band hinges on the charisma of the lead singer. By using three singers, I felt like I could somewhat mitigate that issue.” The specific issue of gender, however, is more fully explored in the following chapter.

In order to further contextualize Lee’s group within the framework of progressive rock, it is important to clarify the term “progressive rock” (also sometimes called “art rock” or “symphonic rock”); however, a clear definition is nearly impossible to pin down, although interest in the progressive rock of the 1970s began to resurface in the 1990s and early 2000s and a hefty amount of scholarly work already exists. Much of this current work actually serves to define the genre, which has proved a difficult task, and, ultimately, it is probably easier to define through its divorce from stylistic norms. That said, some scholars use a metric involving a comparison between rock music that makes use of standard elements and rock music that makes use of nonstandard elements. For example, in his article, “Yes, ‘Awaken,’ and the Progressive Rock Style,” John R. Palmer lays out several norms of standard rock in both instrumentation and form, and in his What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis, Ken Stephenson provides a

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27 Lee (2014).
book-length analysis of the same.\textsuperscript{30} According to Palmer and Stephenson, standard rock instrumentation comprises voice, guitar, bass, drums, and keys.\textsuperscript{31} Standard rock form comprises small-scale works (under four minutes) in a verse/refrain form that move in regular four-measure units. The standard harmonic palette is derived from blues, and the harmonies generally occur in root position, driven by movement in the bass line. Standard rhythm includes simple meters with repeated, predictable stress patterns usually on the beat, as well as on the first and third measure of the standard four-measure units. Standard texture is homophonic. Standard subject matter includes lyrics that focus on worldly rather than abstract ideas. While progressive rock incorporates many of these elements, they are interwoven with other, atypical elements, such as use of nonstandard instrumentation derived from world music or western classical music; larger-scale works in more extended forms that heavily feature instrumental solos; more complicated harmonic patterns derived from jazz, world music, or the classical western canon; additive rhythms and asymmetrical meters; contrapuntal textures; and lyrics that often focus on fantasy worlds, spirituality, or other abstract ideas.\textsuperscript{32}

Covach has written and spoken extensively on what progressive rock is, as well, defining both the style and the musical aspirations of progressive rock musicians to create “art music” that pushes stylistic and aesthetic boundaries and that fuses the formal structures and motivic development that is found in the music of the classical western canon with elements of rock

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{30} Stephenson (2002).

\textsuperscript{31} Palmer defines the standard instrumentation as vocals, guitars, drums, and keys. However, in his \textit{Rock: The Primary Text}, Allan F. Moore defines the standard instrumentation as vocals, guitar, bass, and drums. In his \textit{Rocking the Classics} (1997), Edward Macan quotes Hugh Hopper (of Soft Machine) discussing how prior to the late 1960s, the keyboard was considered part of the rhythm section if it was included in the band at all, and Macan notes that it was, in fact, the development of the Moog, Mellotron, and Hammond organ that allowed for the creation of the “progressive rock sound” as we often think of it.

\textsuperscript{32} Moore (2007).
\end{footnotesize}
music.\textsuperscript{33} A handful of other scholars, including Chris Anderton, Allan F. Moore, and Kevin Holm-Hudson, have built upon this definition, arguing that progressive rock is rather an umbrella term for any style of music that combines elements of rock with elements of some other genre(s).\textsuperscript{34}

Suffice it to say that currently, there seems to be little consensus over what precisely progressive rock is. Perhaps Moore has the last and most astute word when he writes that, “progressive rock is not a style, but is best understood stylistically by the establishment of the independence of the idiolect.”\textsuperscript{35} In other words, progressive rock is most easily and clearly defined as what it isn’t, namely a larger style that encompasses shared traits that can be traced and found in the majority of progressive rock groups. According to Moore, progressive rock is a celebration of individualism and differentiation from the idea of style altogether as opposed to a coherent style that remains intact from group to group, album to album, or even piece to piece. In this need to differentiate and forge one’s own path, Lee and his band certainly fit right in.

Lee’s training, as explicated earlier, has deeply influenced his feelings regarding genre-blending. Progressive rock is often viewed as an attempt by musicians to expand upon what had previously been heard as dance music and change the context, transforming it into “art music”; these were pieces written and recorded for posterity, much like the music of the western canon.\textsuperscript{36} In this sense, the lofty ideals behind Lee’s music find a comfortable home – Lee describes The Knells as an “art rock band...drawing inspiration from 1000 years of western classical music and...\textsuperscript{37

\textsuperscript{33} Covach (1997).
\textsuperscript{34} See Anderton (2010), Moore (1993), and Holm-Hudson (2002). Ken McLeod, too, writes about some of the same artists and pieces as those scholars who write about progressive rock, however McLeod refers to ELP, for example, as “classically inflected disco-pop,” rather than progressive rock.
\textsuperscript{35} Moore (2007).
\textsuperscript{36} Covach (1997).
deftly fusing it with the worlds of progressive, psychedelic, and experimental rock.” In describing his influences and what drew him toward progressive rock, Lee says, “Growing up primarily steeped in rock music, the things I encountered were mostly song form: verse, chorus, bridge, etc. I became more interested in prog[ressive] rock because it often seemed to eschew these more conventional forms in favor of longer, more extended suites and ‘pieces,’ with more dramatic and dynamic contrasts.” This self-description is very much in step with 1970s progressive rock group Gentle Giant, for example, who, in the liner notes to their 1971 album, *Acquiring the Taste*, exclaimed, “It is our goal to expand the frontiers of contemporary popular music. From the outset we have abandoned all preconceived thoughts on blatant commercialism. Instead we hope to give you something far more substantial and fulfilling.” Both Lee and Gentle Giant express the desire to push the boundaries of style, which is what progressive rock does.

As noted above, one of the most significant differences between Lee’s music and some other progressive rock fare is the influence Lee’s musical training and expertise have on him. In fact, reviewer John Hagelbarger notes that Lee is “a real-deal classical composer,” and that The Knells “might really come closer to the Philip Glass Ensemble or to Steve Reich and Musicians – a specialized classical chamber ensemble organized by a composer, and dedicated to the performance of his own work – than to any usual kind of rock band.” In his review, Hagelbarger sees a clear path from the early new music scene to the fruition of Lee’s The Knells, pointing out precisely the individualism that Lee so admires that is fostered by the scene. Lee’s

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38 Andrew McKenna Lee, email message to author, October 24, 2016.
attitude (and that of Reich and Glass, in his view) is that it is not enough to just write music, but that an ensemble needs to exist in order to create a specific desired sound world. In this sense, *The Knells* meshes more easily with the classical world than the rock world. In discussing the heritage that progressive rock musicians attempt to co-opt, Covach explains that the way in which theorists or musicologists view the classical music tradition is vastly different from the ways in which progressive rock musicians view the same; elements that scholars might consider unrelated in either time period or country of origin are treated by progressive rockers as if they are interchangeable.\(^{41}\)

Covach’s observation aligns with those of other writers, who have pointed out that the majority of (progressive) rock musicians gain what knowledge they have of the western classical tradition through learning by rote or attempting to reverse-engineer Mozart or Bach, for example; the earnestness with which these borrowed techniques are used may sometimes lend an air of simplicity to the resulting product. Holm-Hudson, for example, talks about a “willful lack of historic context” in reference to the sort of classical borrowing that occurs in some progressive rock.\(^{42}\) In contrast, Lee’s music stands out for how true to the source his classical technique is,

\(^{41}\) “Such diverse art-music characteristics as baroque-era counterpoint, romantic-era virtuosity, and modernist rhythmic syncopation and sectional juxtaposition, for instance, seem to coexist comfortably and without any sense of historical incongruity within much progressive rock music. One gets the sense that for these rock musicians, as well as for the audience for whom they compose, record, and perform their music, all of these borrowings are of the same kind: ‘classical’.\)” Covach (1997), 8. Macan describes much the same phenomenon in *Rocking the Classics*: “Progressive rock pianists drew on a host of rhetorical devices drawn from the classical piano repertoire of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, that is, from roughly Chopin and Liszt to Debussy, Ravel, and Bartók. There is also a definite influence of J.S. Bach’s toccata style in progressive rock.” Macan (1997), 36. In the same book, Macan describes a preferred singing style whose “roots…lie in the Anglican and Catholic choral tradition,” and yet whose melodic lines are often “mainly concerned with setting the text’s rhythms as naturally as possible…[as] is quite common…to opera.” Macan (1997), 39. See Yes’s “Close to the Edge” for an example of what Covach describes as “modernist rhythmic syncopation and sectional juxtaposition” in combination with a Baroque style fugue-like section and vocals that, at times, appear to stem from the choral tradition. See also Gentle Giant’s “Knots” for an example of Renaissance-style vocal polyphony juxtaposed against sections that are reminiscent of Varèse’s early twentieth-century percussion piece *Ionisation*.\(^{42}\)

\(^{42}\) Holm-Hudson (2005), 380.
and for the apropos borrowings from multiple time periods and styles; Lee knows whence he comes, and makes informed choices about when and where to use differing stylistic and compositional techniques. Lee’s harmonic choices are firmly rooted in both the rock and jazz traditions; he chooses to use hocket as it was used in the medieval period; and the voice-leading in his writing often follows traditional counterpoint rules. While this music is certainly progressive rock, it also just as easily can be classified as new music, and in that sense is, in fact, classical music. In other words, this music exemplifies the progressive rock of the twenty-first century precisely because it expands the definition of what progressive rock is, yet it is also consistent with an evolving classical music scene that includes ensembles and artists such as David T. Little’s Newspeak or Corey Dargel; i.e., classical artists who rely on the hybridization of the new music scene, and who, frankly, prefer working with a backbeat.43

Lee, too, revels in simply expressing himself however he sees fit, using the models that feel most exciting and interesting for him at the time of composition: “When it comes to mixing disparate elements, there’s a Charlie Parker quote I’m quite fond of: ‘If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art.’ I don’t really understand why artists, quite simply, can’t do whatever they want to do. Combining disparate elements from various styles, etc. is one of the ways in which

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43 Today’s expression of new music is still in step with what the artists of the 1960s were creating. Now, as then, many of the more popular artists look toward popular music for inspiration. Moreover, we should bear in mind that composers working downtown have, in fact, always drawn inspiration from pop, rock, and jazz, and this trend has continued to the present day. For instance, John Cale was a member of the Velvet Underground; Paul Lansky was sampled by Radiohead, and Radiohead's Johnny Greenwood has begun to be taken seriously as a classical composer; Bryce Dessner of The National has been making a name for himself as a classical composer, with commissions from the likes of The Kronos Quartet and So Percussion; Philip Glass collaborated with David Bowie on both the “Low” Symphony and the “Heroes” Symphony; Nico Muhly has worked with Björk; et al. In other words, while the trend has always been there, it is becoming increasingly common for serious classical musicians to write music with significant roots in popular music.
new styles and forms of music are born.” Lee goes on to explain that he doesn't want to make any particular statement with his music and, in fact, would rather divorce himself from “the scene” entirely, stating: “I feel constricted and frustrated by the [contemporary] new music scene: the tradition from which this music draws is admittedly very deep, but also extremely narrow. It is only welcoming of new ideas so long as they are the ‘right kind’ of new ideas, [and] other sub-genres are just as bad.” Ironically, it is precisely this frustration with the requirement to adhere to stylistic norms that connects Lee’s music so strongly to the new music scene, and he is well aware that his ensemble is very much in keeping with the DIY aesthetic of the early years of the downtown scene, saying “Reich, Glass, Zorn, etc. were all at one point or another disillusioned with classical music institutions, and reacted by starting their own ensembles that could render their own, unique sonic visions. I’ve definitely taken a page from their playbook in this way, and am all the happier for it, creatively speaking.” This speaks to the idea that for Lee, using the terms “progressive rock” and “new music” are useful precisely because he finds boundaries stifling, and the idea of an umbrella term that describes mixing elements of rock with some outside influences as well as the idea of rejecting “the scene” resonate with him.

*The Knells* is certainly progressive rock; however, Lee’s musical choices impart new elements drawn from the new music scene to the style and expand upon the existing boundaries in the reactionary tradition of New York City’s new music; Lee paints his text using complex harmonies, rhythms, and musical gestures on the micro-scale against the backdrop of a simple harmonic expanse on the macro-scale, and his use of these harmonic and melodic gestures

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44 Andrew McKenna Lee, in email message to author, October 23, 2016.
45 Ibid.
dovetails with the meaning of the poetry. All of these elements appear in *The Knells* right from the beginning.

The first song in Lee’s cycle is entitled “Airlift,” and it is clear right from the opening that many of the elements described above are already in play. Lee considers himself “kind of a big ‘solid, consonant tonal center with wrong notes’ kind of guy.”

This plays out in “Airlift,” which really only visits two key centers. Because Lee composes so little in the way of modulation and the harmonies are often non-functional, it is more fruitful, as Moore suggests, to approach it through the lens of pandiatonicism or modal music than through a traditional harmonic analysis. In his 2005 article “‘Come Sail Away’ and the Commodification of ‘Prog Lite,’” Kevin Holm-Hudson points to Edward Macan’s observation that “many progressive rock bands, for all their ‘classical’ trappings, still used the modal harmonies that were derived from the folk revival of the 1960s.” Lee continues this tradition in large part. Alternatively, the lack of traditional functional harmony within the framework of tonality may be looked at as an offshoot of Lee's engagement with minimalism and the downtown scene. For the entirety of the new music scene's existence, it has always been engaged with the experimental rock scene; John Cale, for example, of the Velvet Underground quickly springs to mind, as he is deeply connected to both the rock and new music scenes. One of the hallmarks of minimalism is its tendency toward consonance, and in “Airlift,” most of the harmonic material is certainly consonant.

The song opens in an overall E tonality with large swaths that revolve around the E-pentatonic scale and cadences generally occurring in E Dorian, normative for rock music, wherein cadences will

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47 Lee, in email message to author, October 20, 2017
48 Holm-Hudson (2005), 384.
49 Petrusich (2017).
often either entirely omit the leading tone or use the lowered natural seventh, as shown in Example 2.1.\textsuperscript{51}

Example 2.1. Measures 91–92, vocal part, “Airlift,” The resolution from the B minor chord to the E major chord employs a lowered natural seventh.\textsuperscript{52}

Like Macan and Holm-Hudson, John Covach has noted that “in rock music, from about the mid-1960s forward,...the use of the natural seventh scale degree constitute[s a] stylistic norm.”\textsuperscript{53} As shown in Example 2.2, Lee’s use of cross-relation within the second measure pays homage to Renaissance vocal polyphony, and the first five measures alone contain three different time signatures shifting back and forth between regular and asymmetrical meters, in a nod to the additive rhythms popular with the minimalists of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the progressive rock of the 1970s more generally.

\textsuperscript{51} Stephenson (2002).
\textsuperscript{52} All musical examples of Lee’s scores are used with permission.
\textsuperscript{53} Covach (1997), 11.
Example 2.2. Measures 1–4, Guitar 2, “Airlift,” The first several measures of the song cycle contain three different time signatures, and there is a cross-relation in measure 2, and a simultaneous cross-relation in measure 4.

The harmony in this song sounds diatonic, albeit often non-functional. As in jazz music, Lee's harmonies include stacked ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths to create colorful sounds, often without resolutions, and the harmony, especially in the vocal lines, often moves in thirds, as seen in Example 2.3.

Example 2.3. Measures 60–66, Soprano and Mezzo, “Airlift,” the vocal lines utilize close harmonies, often moving in thirds.
Lee himself cites Ravel and Stravinsky as influences in this regard for their use of pandiatonicism and modal writing, and recalls that, “as a sophomore in college, I had the opportunity to sing Stravinsky’s Mass with the choir, which was a...huge, life-changing musical event for me. The chords and harmonies were just so unlike anything I had ever heard before, but they worked for my ears in a way that Schoenberg, Boulez, [and] Stockhausen...did not.” 54 In addition, Lee’s interest in popular 1960s female-led vocal groups such as The Supremes and The Chiffons also occasionally informs the stacked thirds in his vocal writing, as seen in Example 2.4. In his note to the piece, Lee specifically mentions “the harmonic intricacies of jazz and classical music,” as well as his “admiration for 60s pop vocal groups.” 55

![Example 2.4. Measures 4–8, vocal part, The Chiffons’ “One Fine Day” (King/Goffin), Lee was inspired by the ubiquitous close harmonies and stacked thirds in 60s pop vocal groups such as The Chiffons.](image)

54 Lee, email to author, October 23, 2016.
55 “The piece combines the dynamic, formal, and harmonic intricacies of jazz and classical music with the rhythmic energy and expressive vitality of rock, embracing many of the various stylistic streams that have come to define modern song.” Lee, note in The Knells.
The other possible influence on Lee’s vocal writing is downtown heavyweight, Steve Reich, and Reich’s 1981 piece *Tehillim*, specifically, springs to mind. While Lee maintains his own interest in Renaissance polyphony and a pure, non-vibrato sound, it is hard not to find parallels to Reich’s piece, which employs four female voices, also singing amplified and without vibrato, and includes similar use of pitched percussion, which Reich himself says was inspired by early Renaissance polyphony. Of the singing style he requests, Reich says, “The vocal style that I choose...basically the kind of non-vibrato, small voice that you find in early music or jazz. Therefore, these singers are not opera singers, but singers involved in the early music world, who share a light voice, are generally aware of how to use microphones, are very good part singers, and are very accurate rhythmically. To use *bel canto* voices without taking into account that they conjure up Italy or Germany of the 18th and 19th centuries can lead to something inadvertently humorous.” Lee feels similarly about singing style, and it comes across in his writing and his directive to sing with a “casual” sound. This connection further ties Lee to the classical music tradition and the NYC downtown scene, specifically.

Another point of interest is the influence of Lee’s training on his compositional style. Lee's respect and admiration for the great progressive groups of the past are apparent in his writing, but his conservatory training allows him to bring a different type of awareness to his compositions; as opposed to most rock musicians that have come before, Lee boasts a Ph.D. in

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56 “The singers’ vocal style should be similar to that used in the performance of ‘Early Music’ (before 1750). That is, a ‘natural voice’ with great rhythmic agility and no vibrato. The Bel Canto operatic voice is inappropriate. Microphones are used for the volume necessary to be heard over the ensemble.” *Tehillim*, performance note, Reich (1981).

“The ensemble version is scored for four women’s voices (one high soprano, two lyric sopranos, and one alto), piccolo, flute, oboe. English horn, two clarinets, bassoon (optional), six percussion (playing small tuned tambourines with no jingles, clapping, maracas, marimba, vibraphone, and crotales), two electric organs, two violins, viola, cello, and bass.” *Tehillim*, note by the composer, Reich (1981).

57 Swed (2017).
58 Reich (1999).
composition from Princeton. As Holm-Hudson explains, “Many progressive rock musicians—such as Keith Emerson (ELP) and Tony Banks (Genesis)—possessed only limited grade-school musical training; the much-publicized conservatory training of artists such as Rick Wakeman proved to be the exception rather than the rule.”

Lee's influences are therefore different from the influences of a musician who has had little formal training, and his writing reflects that. His training does intimately tie him to the new music scene, however, where formal training is the norm and good working knowledge of “the canon,” however one defines it, is to be expected. A good example of the influence of Lee's training appears in his vocal writing: he employs relatively strict species counterpoint rules in the vocal lines as opposed to some other rock composers, and he uses hocket for extended periods throughout the cycle, most extensively in the last song on the album “Spiral Knells,” as shown in Example 2.5.

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59 Holm-Hudson (2005), 380.
60 “Parallel-triad voicings are ubiquitous in guitar-based rock; those involving ‘white-key’ modalities are similarly features of keyboard-based rock.” Ibid, 393.
Example 2.5. Measures 103–109, vocal part, “Spiral Knells.” These measures are part of a 25-measure section utilizing hocket that occurs in “Spiral Knells.”

In his analysis of Styx's “Come Sail Away,” Holm-Hudson discusses how the lack of formal training and clear understanding of voice-leading in classical music causes some rock musicians to make what may be construed as voice-leading “errors.” As shown in Examples 2.6 and 2.7, Lee’s voice-leading and counterpoint, on the other hand, is, for the most part, “correct,” within the framework of his use of non-harmonic notes as chord tones.
Example 2.6. Measures 98–99, vocal part, “Thread and Fray,” The voices move in contrary motion between the soprano and lower voices, and the neighbor tone in the soprano is approached by step and the dissonance falls on a weak beat.

Example 2.7. Measures 10–11, Mezzo, “Synchromesh,” The mezzo’s leaps are all consonances (by today’s standards), and both her large leap of a fourth and triad outline are followed by stepwise motion in the opposite direction.

Lee’s use of text painting connects him to the classical music world, more generally; he uses Renaissance/Baroque style text painting to illustrate his texts, as in the following examples from “Thread and Fray.” In measure 56, the soprano and alto sing the word “fractured,” and the parts are not only “fractured,” in that different breath marks and dynamic markings are given for each line, but the soprano’s iteration of the word, itself, is “fractured” by an eighth note rest, as shown in Example 2.8.
Example 2.8. Measure 56–57, vocal part, “Thread and Fray,” the alto and soprano have different dynamic markings, and the soprano has a rest in the middle of the word “fractured.”

In this same song, there are several other examples of the very same type of word painting, as show in Examples 2.9, 2.10, and 2.11.

Example 2.9. Measures 60–63, Soprano, “Thread and Fray,” the soprano ascends by almost an octave on the word “skyward” and then descends on the word “fall.”
Example 2.10. Measures 80–81, vocal part, “Thread and Fray,” Lee writes in an eighth rest to illustrate the meaning of the word “pause.”

Example 2.11. Measure 84–86, vocal part, “Thread and Fray,” all three voices linger on the word “linger.”

As shown in Examples 2.12, 2.13, and 2.14, a similar style is used by Purcell in many of his vocal pieces, wherein the composer unmistakably applies the technique of word painting. For
example, in Altisidora’s song from Purcell’s 1694 *Don Quixote* (“From rosy bow’rs...”), which is, coincidentally, a mad scene depicting the character’s struggle to come to grips with lost love, the composer paints the word “fly” in measure 6; the word “blow” in measures 56 and 57; and the word “beats” in measures 60 and 62. In Bonvica’s song from *Bonduca* (1695), Purcell paints the entirety of the line, “Where the shrill trumpets never sound,” in measures 10–12.

![Example 2.12. Measure 6, soprano with piano reduction, “Altisidora’s Song,” Purcell deliberately and obviously musically illustrates the meaning of his text through “flying” sixteenth notes.](image-url)
Example 2.13. Measures 60–62, soprano with piano reduction, “Altisidora’s Song,” Purcell illustrates the beating of the heart in the vocal line.

Lee’s use of a looper connects him very much to the downtown scene, as well as to the progressive rock scene, and looping is an integral part of this song cycle, often as an expression of the protagonist’s inability to see beyond his repetitive, obsessive spiral. Much of the early experimentation with tape-loop technology that eventually evolved into the modern digital looping pedal happened within the avant-garde classical music community, including in New York's downtown scene.\(^{61}\) As a result, today, tape looping is most often associated with the music of the downtown scene, Terry Riley and Steve Reich specifically, and appears in such pieces as Reich’s “It's Gonna Rain” and “Come Out,” and Riley’s “Music for ‘The Gift,’” all of which influenced the 1970s progressive rock scene.\(^{62}\) Thus, the modern looper and, in the past, tape looping, also feature heavily in progressive rock music and are usually associated with Brian Eno and Robert Fripp of King Crimson, specifically the album *No Pussyfooting.* Fripp, in fact, became so engaged with tape looping that he developed his own real-time looping system that he dubbed “Frippertronics.” “Thread and Fray” is the second song on *The Knells,* but the first song on the album that uses a looper. The looper is hooked up to Guitar 1, and the player starts recording in measure 3, playing all the way through until measure 36. The musicians interact with this loop that plays backwards the first 36 measures of the Guitar 1 part, starting in measure 36, as shown in Example 2.15.

\(^{62}\) Riley (2013).

As opposed to the tape loop work of someone like Reich, however, Lee’s loop is not prerecorded nor is it being deployed for purposes of phase-shifting, a difference made possible by today’s more advanced technology: it was simply too unwieldy given the technology in the 1960s and 1970s to record and loop in realtime. As a result, while Lee builds upon technology pioneered by the musicians of the downtown scene, his looper work is more closely related to that of modern musicians such as Pat Metheny or Andrew Bird.\textsuperscript{63} Although he is known primarily as a jazz/rock guitarist, Metheny is very much tied to the new music scene through Reich’s \textit{Electric}

\textsuperscript{63} While Andrew Bird maintains no ties to either the New York City new music scene or the progressive rock scene, he uses a looper in a similar fashion. In his solo performances, for example, Bird creates a many-textured sound by recording his own violin lines, whistling, strumming his violin, etc. and essentially collaborating with himself in realtime.
Counterpoint, which was written for him. On his 2010 album Orchestrion, for example, Metheny improvises with himself using the same technology that Lee employs in “Thread.” As opposed to Metheny, Lee plays his recorded loop backwards, distorting the pulse slightly due to the decay time of the guitar sound being played in reverse.

“Synchromesh,” which appears on the second half of The Knells, makes substantial use of looping in order to bear out the meaning of the text, and, in fact, it is actually the most loop-heavy track on the album. Guitar 2 opens “Synchromesh” by playing and recording on the looper a repeating seven-note-long sixteenth-note pattern for five measures. This equals a total of 12 repetitions before the pattern fully cycles through, once again beginning on the downbeat. In measure 6, the just-recorded loop is played back to free up Guitar 2 to play his next repeating pattern, a 12-note-long figure. This second figure is played intermittently over the looper until the third beat of measure 14, at which point Guitar 2 plays it again while recording onto the second track of the looper. He records until the second beat of measure 19, for a total of seven repetitions, until the pattern fully cycles through, ready start again on the third beat of measure 19. Then, in measure 20, Guitar 2 starts playing and recording over the two tracks loop a 16-note-long pattern that includes an extra group of four sixteenth-notes every six bars to account for a 5/4 measure. By measure 25, there are three looping tracks playing, and Guitar 2 is free to play over them. These loopers create an unusual-sounding interlocking counterpoint that only restarts with all loops reaching the end of their cycles at measure 30. The loops continue to play until measure 52, at which point they fade. At measure 56, Guitar 2 records an 11-beat loop to be played back at measure 61, 68, and, starting at 77, played continuously until a slow fade-out begins at measure 106. This second looping pattern interacts with three other looping lines,

64 Metheny (1989).
which are recorded beginning at measures 62 (a sixteenth-note figure that creates a hemiola effect), 69 (short phrases alternating between 4-, 3-, 6-, and 1-eighth-note-long snippets over a period of 4 bars) and 77 (another set of short phrases alternating between 1-, 4-eighth-note-long snippets over a period of 3 bars). See Example 2.16 (on this page and continued on the following) for an illustration of some of this interlocking looper passage.
The intricacy of these looping parts once again ties Lee to the minimalists, but also to the rock scene; parallels may be drawn to the rhythmic complexity of contemporary “hybrid” groups such as Gutbucket, or, more generally, to niche genres like math rock and some strains of black metal, for example Meshuggah. Furthermore, many of the experimental rock outfits that afford these comparisons have their own connections to the downtown classical scene. The experimental black metal group Liturgy, for instance, includes guitarist Bernard Gann, who is the son of influential former *Village Voice* critic and downtown music champion Kyle Gann. Looping also makes an important appearance in “Dying in Waves,” wherein Lee uses the looper to play a canon with himself. Lee talks about “Dying in Waves” as his “personal response to the idea of the ‘guitar solo’ and its place in rock music,” but suffice it to say that his use of the looper changes from song to song on this album, and begs comparison to both the rock and new music

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65 Although Liturgy is a ostensibly a black metal group, their music, like Lee's, makes use of unconventional instrumentation and complex rhythms, and incorporates a desire to fuse multiple styles in service of an all-encompassing musical work. See Joyce (2015).
In the cases of both rock and new music, looping is often an easy way to add layers of texture without adding more musicians, and allows for exploration of what a single musician can create on his own, building a soundscape in real time, as discussed above regarding Metheny and Bird. Classical composers often use looping simply to explore its fundamental properties, as in the Reich and Riley pieces mentioned above, and while this is not as often the case in popular music, it can be true there as well, especially for the pop musicians who maintain a connection to the new music scene. Laurie Anderson’s use of a looper in her 1981 pop song “O Superman,” for example, uses it to do an otherwise impossible thing: “O Superman” would be fundamentally different if Anderson had needed to work with other singers or if she had used a pre-recorded backing tape of herself singing the same note over and over again. As for Lee, superficially, it seems that he may simply be solving the logistical problem of not wanting to involve more guitarists; however, he still chooses to use the looper even when a second guitarist is available or when he could just as easily hand off lines of music to the vibraphone player, which illustrates that he has conceptual reasons for choosing the looper, tying him to the legacy of the minimalists, and to the legacy of the rock artists such as Brian Eno and Robert Fripp, among others, who built upon this heritage. Lee himself says he simply wanted to play a solo, inspired by classics such as “Black Mountain Side” from *Led Zeppelin I* and “ Bron-Yr-Aur” from *Physical Graffiti*, and that writing in other instruments would obviously defeat the purpose and

66 See the following chapter for a more in-depth discussion of “Dying in Waves,” as well as Lee’s use of the looper and the reasons behind his choices.

67 See David Simpson’s “How We Made Laurie Anderson’s ‘O Superman’” (Anderson, 2016) for a more detailed discussion.
get in the way of his intentions. While Lee does not acknowledge a nod to the minimalists, his reasons for choosing to use the looper are clearly conceptual.

A further connection to both progressive rock and classical music is Lee’s structuring of this song cycle as a whole. The “concept album” as we currently understand it, i.e. an album which functions as a cohesive whole around unified themes or subjects, and in some cases recycles musical material at multiple points on the album, was arguably a product of progressive rock in the 1970s, as part of the quest for greater musical sophistication and more ambitious forms. The Knells can easily be viewed as fitting in with this tradition, and yet Lee’s approach is considerably more classical than is found in records like Pink Floyd’s The Wall or the Who’s Tommy. The Wall, for example, consists largely of a series of musically distinct songs that are joined together by their roles in the exposition of a loose plot-line, and a few instances of recycled thematic material—chiefly, the musical similarities among the three parts of “Another Brick in The Wall.” Yet most of the songs use the traditional verse/chorus pop song structure, or vestiges of such, and the occasional recycling of material is not so much developmental as referential, and lacks the teleological approach to development that is so often found in classical music. Nors S. Josephson details many instances of progressive rock bands engaging with classical forms and idioms, and provides examples of progressive bands working with versions of motivic development, as seen in sonata form, for example, but generally this development happens at the level of a single song. In The Knells, songs move into and out of one another, motifs are developed, and there are connections from song to song, as in a symphony, rather than hermetic songs tied together with occasional thematic recycling or thrown together simply for

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68 Lee, text message to the author, January 24, 2018.
69 Sturges (2009).
purposes of creating an album of some length. Specifically, for example, Lee develops a recurring motif, set class [014], that appears at regular intervals and, by the end of the cycle, has evolved into a tetrachord, and then devolved into a dyad.\textsuperscript{71} While there is development to be found within the framework of single songs on The Knells, the structure does not adhere to typically classical forms, though the idea is certainly related. Just one example of this type of structural development occurs in “Thread and Fray,” and is illustrated in Examples 2.16 and 2.17. The second half of the song is more expansive than the first half, both harmonically and rhythmically: whereas in the first half, Lee creates confusion around the pulse, in the second half, the disorienting two-versus-three ambiguity is expanded to the level of the bar, thus the idea is developed and serves to help secure structure without falling into the category of, say, sonata form or rondo form.

Example 2.17. Measures 44–48, vocal part, “Thread and Fray” the pulse oscillates between two and three at the level of the beat.

\textsuperscript{71} See the following chapter for a detailed view of this motif, and to see it tracked and developed throughout the cycle.
Example 2.18. mm. 81–83, vocal part, “Thread and Fray,” The idea of two-versus-three has been expanded to the level of the bar as Lee shifts between 6/8 and 9/8. The pulse always remains steady, but bar length differs.

As the above demonstrates, Lee has harnessed his love of multiple genres and familiarity with and access to the NYC downtown scene in order to create a hybridized band and write a song cycle that highlights his understanding of multiple styles and scenes. The Knells is equal parts experimental/progressive rock and new music, as Lee brings to bear his instrument, educational background, and performance experience in order to create a highly individualized sound. In the following chapter, I expand upon some of the points mentioned above, and, through the lens of Disability Studies, explore how Lee’s genre blending is tied to his depression. Lee’s use of the vocal writing techniques as described above, and his use of the looper, for example, become expressions of the obsessive negative thoughts Lee has experienced and his deviation from standard counterpoint rules express his feelings of isolation.
This chapter explores The Knells’ self-titled 2013 album through the lens of Disability Studies, and show how techniques explicated in the previous chapter are expressions of Lee’s depression. The text of this song cycle deals with depression, and uses vivid, almost psychedelic imagery, juxtaposing the scale of the individual's pain with the nearly inconceivable size of the universe. Ultimately, Lee's protagonist derives no answers despite his search; questions linger, and the struggle for meaning and hope remains just as fierce a battle at the end of the cycle as at the beginning. In *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the American Psychiatric Association writes that feelings of hopelessness are one of the key indicators of depression, and Lee very much captures this in his song cycle.\(^{72}\) His protagonist reaches and pushes and searches, yet the texts and compositional techniques all ultimately point most strongly to the churning feeling of battling but getting nowhere. Lee composes this struggle into his music, and uses multiple techniques to further enhance the imagery of his text. He employs mode mixture (layering major and minor chords), as well as hocket, use of a looper pedal, and challenging vocal and guitar techniques to musically explore his mental state.

The first song in the cycle is entitled “Airlift.” In this song, Lee uses several of the above techniques to illustrate his depression. Mode mixture is one of the defining sounds of Lee's music, and repeatedly returns throughout the cycle both melodically and harmonically, but especially melodically, and we first encounter it in “Airlift.” As shown in Examples 3.1, 3.2, and

\(^{72}\) American Psychiatric Association (2013)
3.3, Lee composes multiple instances of overlaid major and minor thirds (set class [014]) inserted into non-chromatic chords and melodies, providing sharp contrast for the listener, i.e., a musical expression of the sharp pangs of insecurity, pain, and anger that can come with depression. In his *Extraordinary Measures*, Joseph Straus describes the idea of identifying as a person with a disability as opposed to identifying as a person trying to overcome a disability, and the idea that a disability may leave permanent traces that can be tracked in the music of disabled composers. In the case of Lee's music, perhaps the ubiquitous [014]s continue to recur as a musical expression of the protagonist’s inability to shed his anxiety and pain. While this sound is unintentional fallout of Lee’s use of mode mixture, and in other contexts might not warrant mention, against the backdrop of Lee’s consonant pandiatonicism, it is a striking sonority that draws attention to itself. Lee himself maintains that during the compositional process he was unaware of his frequent use of [014], saying:

> The music is subconscious. It speaks to whatever I'm feeling and trying to get out.
> There's a great Stravinsky quote: ‘Music, by its very nature, is essentially powerless to express anything at all.’ That's a comfortable place to be when you're dealing with music...because it allows you to write what feels good for you.

One interpretation is that Lee was trying to express the minor/major tinge of the poetry: for Lee, the clash of positive and negative emotions was inescapable, even on an unconscious level. Beck and Alford describe that symptoms of moderate depression often fluctuate throughout the day, with the subject feeling worse in the mornings, and thus the [014] trichord—with its quality of

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73 “A pitch-class set is an unordered collection of pitch-classes. It is a motive from which many of the identifying characteristics—register, rhythm, order—have been boiled away. The normal form [is] the most compressed way of writing a pitch-class set, [and] makes it easy to see the essential attributes of a set.” Straus (2005), 33–35.
74 Straus (2011).
75 Andrew McKenna Lee, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2016.
containing both major and minor thirds, inherently what the listener may hear as both major and minor tonalities—is unstable in the way the mood of the depressed subject is unstable.\textsuperscript{76} It is simultaneously major and minor and may be heard differently by different listeners.

Figure 3.1. Set class [014] in normal form.


Example 3.2. Measures 16-17, Guitar 1, “Airlift,” a melodic [014].

\textsuperscript{76} Beck and Alford (2009).
As a composer, Lee considers himself “conservative, harmonically speaking,” and this plays out in “Airlift,” which makes use of standard modulations, and through Lee's use of mostly diatonic harmony—the ubiquitous chromatic blue notes are nonfunctional, although they do lend the song its distinctive sound.\textsuperscript{77} Lee’s use of these standard modulations is in keeping with the way modulations in rock music often occur: Allan F. Moore suggests that “rock tends to conceive its harmonies as indivisible units rarely subject to voice-leading principles. The fact that a [rock theory] has not appeared sooner might suggest that perception, and even conception, frequently goes no further than the stringing together of a series of discrete harmonies.”\textsuperscript{78} The overall key areas in Lee’s piece, representative of the vast and constantly present cosmos, stubbornly hover on E and A for the duration of the song—there is only one modulation. These key areas, while symbolically important, are also determined by their ease and functionality. The Knells is a guitar-driven group, employing two lead guitars; E and A tonalities are a natural choice, and melodic lines, too, are often dictated by their ease of execution on the guitar. Moore notes that his objection to “the application of Schenkerian methods to [rock is] namely that the voice-leading frequently does not determine harmonic succession, which may, therefore, be entirely ‘dissonant,’” explaining that “guitar chords tend to be held in a convenient position with

\textsuperscript{77} Andrew McKenna Lee, in discussion with the author, October 5, 2016.
\textsuperscript{78} Moore (1992).
bass and treble pitches possible determinants: inner parts rarely have a linear role, merely existing to fill out the chord.” 79 This is precisely what happens in “Airlift,” and Lee acknowledges that he enjoys composing music that feels good to play. That said, the idea of “feeling good” is subjective, and much of the material Lee composes is, in fact, technically tricky, which speaks to the idea that there is a working out of his mental distress in the physicality of performing this music; that is to say, Lee physicalizes his struggle by often forcing himself, as well as his players and singers, into inherently uncomfortable positions. With this in mind, parallels to the lore surrounding the opening bassoon solo of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring become obvious: James A. Grymes writes of this notorious solo, “Stravinsky once told François Oubradous, who was first soloist at the Opera, that the solo must ‘be very painful.’” 80 It seems that Lee gets some pleasure, or a release of sorts at the very least, by playing through technically challenging lines, and almost cannot help but write for the band in ways that test their physical limitations. 81

In keeping with his use of physicality and of the mode mixture described above, Lee also relies on non-traditional harmonic resolutions in his music, which are an outgrowth of the fruitless search for psychic resolution within himself. This lack of traditional resolutions speaks

80 In his article, James A. Grymes notes that the high tessitura of this solo was not, in fact, unprecedented, and that accounts of Stravinsky’s intentions vary widely. It is Grymes’ conclusion that “Stravinsky...felt that he was writing in a feasible range of the instrument,” and that “evidence seems to reveal that he [Stravinsky] did not consider the solo to be unreasonably high.” Grymes (1998). The common perception, in contrast, is that the composer wrote the solo in the range he did because he intended for the line to sound strained.
81 The disparity between the physical challenge of performing Lee’s music and the seeming limitations that Lee’s depression puts on him are stark, and speaks to the narrative of transcending disability and the “super body.” In writing about these tropes, Joseph M. M. Aldinger writes that “Winning [or, in this case, playing or singing difficult passages] moves toward excessive ability, a body that through will and physical prowess can overcome...personal obstacles. Disability is briefly rehabilitated through the act of [playing well] and its conferral of ability.” (Aldinger, 2016). Lee puts his ensemble in the position of playing out this narrative outside of himself in asking them to express his struggle through overcoming the physical challenge of playing/singing thorny, physically taxing music.
to Lee's text: the subject of the cycle is lost in emotional turmoil, also without resolution, “like a
dog going in circles, not knowing whether to lie down or to chase his tail into the ground.”
Lee’s protagonist appears also to be dealing with a fixation on how to address his feelings of
aimlessness. The image of a “dog going in circles” and “chasing his tail into the ground”
illustrate this, as does the image of a “gear without a cog,” purposelessly spinning. The imagery
is repetitive and circular, and Lee composes this into his score through the section utilizing
hocket that begins in measure 89. If the text beginning at measure 99 is taken as heard by the
listener rather than as it is written out, we hear: “Your mind, your mind, is like, is like, a dog, a
dog...” and it is composed in a series of descending dyads that ascend by whole step, as shown in
Example 3.4. The music itself is circular and doesn't seem to know whether it is ascending or
descending. It is also worth noting that this series of dyads harks back to measure 16 of the
piece’s lengthy introduction wherein Guitar 1 plays a series of descending dyads that descend by
minor third and always land on an E natural outlining an E-diminished seven chord, as shown in
Example 3.5; in the first iteration, the harmony is clear, and the musical figure is clearly
descending and fixated on the E, whereas in this second iteration, the musical figure is confused
and searching.

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82 See Appendix I for the full text.

Example 3.5. Measure 16, Guitar 1, “Airlift,” The above harks back to this series of descending dyads outlining an E-diminished seven chord found in the introduction of the piece.

In his article “Music and the Agents of Obsession,” Blake Howe discusses “obsessive musical spaces,” specifically focusing on the idea that notes may become “stuck” as an expression of obsession, forcing the rest of the piece to accommodate the fixation.\(^\text{83}\) In Lee’s case, the E of measures 16 and 17 is so enmeshed in the harmony that it is difficult to tease apart whether the E is directing the harmony and the other parts are moving to accommodate or if the E is accidental fallout, perhaps in the way that it can be difficult to tell whether depressed ruminations are the result or the cause of unhappiness.

\(^{83}\) Howe (2016).
The unresolved nature of the text plays out especially in the last several measures of the vocal lines, wherein the mezzo and alto continue to move in stacked thirds while the soprano, typically the most important melodic line, flounders detachedly more than an octave above the lowest voice with harmonic resolutions lagging a full measure behind the resolutions occurring in the rest of the score, and the three voices conclude the song with a tone cluster and crossed voices. The text painting in this section comes through in the harmonic disconnect of the soprano voice from the rest of the band, and the tessitura disconnect from the lower two voices. In measure 114 on the word “neutrality,” the large gap between the voices begins to close, illustrating the chaos of “a large and violent sea” acquiescing into “of neutrality.” Only the mezzo and alto sing the words “of neutrality,” so that even when the soprano manages to close the tessitura gap, she is still unable to eke out the words with the other two singers, and she further loses her place in the hierarchy when the voices cross, the mezzo singing above the soprano. The soprano’s lying so far away from the other parts in both pitch and time connotes loneliness and a sense of disconnectedness from the rest of world. By the end of the piece, there is no less confusion, just half-hearted acceptance as the voices settle into an unresolved tone cluster and “Airlift” flows into the second song, “Thread and Fray.”

Throughout the piece, but first introduced in “Airlift,” Lee attempts to create a less “alienating” sound than listeners might expect from a group of classically trained musicians. He asks his singers, for example, to sing without vibrato, and consistently asks for a “casual” sound that smacks less of pretension. In her article “The Organ of The Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect,” Laurie Stras states that objectives such as Lee’s are quite common, and although Stras refers specifically to the sound of the damaged voice, the parallels are uncanny: “Many singers
have learned to simulate or manipulate damage in the voice, so further revealing the affective value of the sound; and in a reversal of what might be considered normate associations, damage here seems to be linked with concepts of authority, authenticity, and integrity.\textsuperscript{84} Lee is not asking for a damaged sound, yet he does ask for a thinner sound and a more washed-out color palette, and places the voices in inherently challenging, and possibly uncomfortable, tessituras: the alto dips unusually low for a female voice and the soprano sits in the passaggio for almost the entirety of the cycle sans vibrato. As Stras points out, the resulting reduction in tone quality is actually the desired effect because it lends to the music an air of authenticity and truth, and perhaps also hints at the ways in which living with and working through depression may cause one to feel a limit on the color palette of life experiences. Moreover, the fact that Lee uses three women as the vehicle for his expression speaks to his own feelings of alienation: Lee writes texts about his own feelings while working through depressive episodes, but while he essentially asks the singers to emote on his behalf, he has on the other hand tamped down their ability to do so effectively by removing vibrato from the sound and requiring that, for the most part, they function as ensemble singers, often singing what, in other contexts, might be considered backup style harmonies. Furthermore, Lee’s use of exclusively female voices provides yet another avenue for him to distance himself from the emotional material at hand: not only does he not sing the text himself, but he has it articulated by three women rather than another man. This music essentially foregrounds what, in any other context, would be relegated to the background. By taking away the role of charismatic lead singer who speaks for the band, which, in other

\textsuperscript{84} Stras (2006).
circumstances would almost certainly be a role that only the composer could fill, Lee further removes himself from the equation and further distances himself from the material.\textsuperscript{85}

Although the vocal lines suggest an outward discomfort and uneasy feel, the instrumental outro hints at an inner kernel of hope. In their book \textit{Overcoming Depression Without Drugs: Mahler’s Polka with Introductory Funeral March}, John A. Snyder and Nancy Steffen-Fluhr write that the mere fact that Mahler composed at all is a sign of his mental wellbeing.\textsuperscript{86} They write that “Mahler...is a survivor,” explaining that “Depression and passion are antonyms...Depression is the absence/blockage of feelings, not the presence of ‘bad’ feelings.”\textsuperscript{87} The mere existence of \textit{The Knells} is evidence that Lee grapples with his depression on a musical level, and glimmers of moving through it are illustrated in the last bars of “Airlift.” From measures 112 to 120, as the vocal tessitura drops and the singers decrescendo in despair, the rest of the band begins to gain momentum, with the drums reentering in measure 119 and each of the other players continually ascending toward the upper reaches of their instruments until the piece ends at measure 132.

Beginning in measure 89 of “Airlift” and extending through measure 105, Lee includes an extended medieval-style hocket passage in the vocal part (see Examples 3.5 and 3.6 for an illustration of this hocket section). Ernest H. Sanders describes how hocket was often used “as an exclamatory or pictorially descriptive device,”\textsuperscript{88} and it remains so in “Airlift.” Hocket first

\textsuperscript{85} On this front, Lee describes feeling a special kinship with drummer Neil Peart, who writes the lyrics for Rush, while bassist Geddy Lee is the one who sings them. [Andrew] Lee suggests that it is no coincidence that he gravitates toward this format in his own music given his love and admiration for Rush.

\textsuperscript{86} It should be noted here that the title of this text invokes the trope of overcoming, rather than focusing on the productive space for which depression allows. Although the title sends this dated message, the body of the text does, in fact, provide examples of creatively working within a depressed state rather than seeking to overcome. The narrative of overcoming will be further discussed later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{87} Snyder and Steffen-Fluhr, (2012).

\textsuperscript{88} Sanders (1974).
appears with the text, “Crack it open like an egg,” illustrating the poetry through the “cracked” melodic line, and it continues throughout the following text:

You can sense an ocean,

but you're a ship in a bottle,

or a snow globe locked in a desert,

or a lighthouse without fog,

or a gear without a cog —

or your mind is like a dog going around in circles,

not knowing whether to lie down,

or to chase his tail into the ground.

This text illustrates the obsessive ruminations characteristic of depression and the panic of engaging with these circular thoughts. It is the only section to include the kind of pervasive repetition seen here: five lines out of eight begin with the word “or.” Lee uses anaphora as a rhetorical device to draw attention to the importance of this stanza, and he uses hocket to further draw in the listener. In her essay “Robert Schumann: Music Amid the Madness,” which discusses Schumann's Symphony No. 2, conductor Marin Alsop notes that the third movement of the symphony includes a baroque-influenced fugue, and she speculates that “the act of organizing the sound, with fugues in particular, provided the composer with some sense of relief [from his depression].” Something similar may be occurring in Lee's hocket section—the very act of organizing the notes and meting them out amongst the voices may speak to obsessive impulses. The broken words produced by the hocket illustrate the protagonist’s panicked gasps and inability to form complete words or thoughts. Moreover, his use of the device changes

Alsop (2008).
throughout the section to develop the ideas of instability. The section opens with the melody alone divided between the voices, and by the end of the section the text is divided, as well, so no individual line makes textual or melodic sense on its own. This very much aligns with the ways in which hocket was used during the late medieval and early renaissance period, as illustrated by comparing Examples 3.6 to Examples 3.7 and 3.8.

Example 3.6. Excerpt from “Lucida pecorella son,” by Donatus de Florentia, hocket wherein both the melodic line and text are divided between voices.

Example 3.7. Measures 89–91, vocal part, “Airlift,” hocket wherein just the melodic line is divided between voices, but the text of each line remains intact.
Example 3.8. Measures 99–100, vocal part, “Airlift,” hocket wherein both the text and melody are divided between voices.

The second track on Lee’s album is “Thread,” which moves attacca into “Fray.” In fact, in the score, there is no indication that these two songs are not actually a single piece. It is only through discussion with Lee during the rehearsal process that it became apparent that he treats “Thread” and “Fray” as separate items. In an interview with Textura, Lee says, “Although they’re two tracks, these two tunes definitely go together,” and, in rehearsal and performance, Lee always refers to these two songs as one unit entitled, “Thread and Fray.” As such, I, too, will treat these items as one piece, with “Thread” forming introductory material and “Fray” forming the song proper, although they are differentiated on the album.

The text of “Thread and Fray” comes out of an attempt to see the overwhelming feelings of sadness, dissatisfaction, and anger in a larger context. Lee says, “The things that make me unhappy are, in a much larger sense, not all that important. I was trying to write [this album] from a ‘cosmic’ perspective; I often keep my eyes too close to the glass, and...tend to take

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90 Lee (2013).
everything personally, and assign it meaning when it has none.”\footnote{Lee, conversation with the author August 15, 2017} Throughout this text, the protagonist seeks to anchor himself through comparing the small scale of his own struggles and the ephemerality of life with the limitlessness of images such as the endlessness of the horizon, and compares the futility of holding onto perceived slights to the pointlessness of trying to hold onto a fistful of water, for example.

Lee describes the writing in this song as his attempt to compose the sound of a “human lava lamp,” saying that, “‘Thread,’ with its reverbed-out wah-wah guitar and backwards loops,” should have a timeless, gooey feel.\footnote{Ibid.} Like “Airlift,” “Thread and Fray” opens in an E minor tonality featuring many non-scale tones. In fact, all twelve pitches appear within the first six measures over the course of the first three measures of a five-bar vibraphone solo, as shown in Example 3.9, almost as if the vibraphone is searching to anchor itself in a key the way the protagonist is searching for a lifeline.

![Example 3.9](image)

Example 3.9. Measures 1–6, Vibraphone, “Thread and Fray,” all twelve pitches appear within the first three measures of the vibraphone solo.

In addition to the rapid-fire pitches, which distort the sense of key, Lee further enhances the “lava lamp” feel through an undulating melodic shape, and by structuring the piece so that it is
not always clear whether it is 6/8 (or 2/4) or 3/4, as shown in Example 3.10, although with score in hand, it is clear that the piece is in 6/8. The guitar plays a string of sixteenth notes whose rhythm appears syncopated because of where the high notes of each measure fall, while underneath, the vibraphone and crotales play quarter notes in measure 19, creating the feel of 3/4; dotted eighth notes in measure 20, creating the feel of 2/4; and eighth notes in measure 21, creating the feel of 6/8. In measures 23 and 24, the crotales and vibraphone hold sustained notes for uneven durations, changing pitch in unexpected places, throwing off the listener’s sense of the downbeat.

Example 3.10. Measures 19–24, Guitar 1, Crotales, and Vibraphone, “Thread and Fray,” the juxtaposition of the rhythmic patterns in the guitar, vibraphone, and crotales, especially toward measures 23 and 24, distorts the sense of the time signature.
In his article, “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory,” Joseph Straus discusses in his analysis of Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony an idea related to Lee’s searching chromaticism. Straus writes of the first chromatic note to appear in the Eroica that a popular interpretation suggests that “the hero strides forth [in diatonic fashion], but then falters momentarily [upon the appearance of the chromatic note], his mobility impaired...by...an internal apprehension or foreboding.” Straus goes on to discuss the historical context of the idea of disability overcome, and thus Beethoven’s chromaticism overcome in a triumphant fashion. The current understanding of disability has moved away from this destructive trope of overcoming, and such a reading is no longer a favorable one; nonetheless, it still informs our understanding of chromaticism, and in this sense may be applied to “Thread and Fray.” In the case of the opening material to “Thread,” the non-chord tones also represent “an internal apprehension,” as in the Beethoven, but this apprehension is never overcome. In fact, they foreshadow an integration of dissonance into otherwise unadorned harmony, and actually seep into the fabric of the piece, even in moments when solid harmonies and an easy groove appear to be foregrounded. Almost every large A major resolution includes a B-natural in the harmony (see Example 3.11). The dissonance here is part of the identity of the chord structure and informs the harmony, as opposed to being a nuisance that Lee spends the length of the song overcoming.

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Example 3.11. Measures 88-90, vocal part and Guitar 1, “Thread and Fray,” dissonance has seeped into otherwise unembellished harmonies. Guitar 1 plays a B-natural in an otherwise basic A major resolution.

The piece is called “Thread,” and the instruments each represent a “thread” in the tapestry of the song; in fact, it takes the entire length of “Thread” for all the instruments to enter, and the only two instruments that have a simultaneous entrance are the bass and drums, which signals the transition to “Fray,” which is “really like a huge anthemic ballad, propelled forward via a solid chord progression and a distinctive rhythmic pattern in the kick drum.”94 Despite the underlying clarity of this song, there is much meaning to be derived from pulling apart some of the more seemingly superficial elements, as I discuss below.

The bulk of the introductory material (“Thread”) repurposes music that Lee wrote in his 2007 guitar-vibraphone duo piece, “Unraveling.” Lee, himself, has described the guitar lines to be rather unidiomatic and challenging to play because they were initially written for the

94 Ibid.
vibraphone alone, and, in recycling them, Lee handed them off to the guitars. Further, the physical discomfort of working through a thicket of tricky lines and finger patterns, although not necessarily apparent to listeners, allows the performer to physicalize the expression of an internal struggle. In this sense, Lee pulls from multiple traditions, although the most striking parallel is perhaps to the 1963 performance of Satie’s *Vexations*, organized by avant-garde composer John Cage, and which, incidentally, included on its roster of performers John Cale of The Velvet Underground. The piece is a simple string of chords written over a thirteen-note theme comprising eleven pitches. In the score, Satie writes, “In order to play this motif 840 times, one would have to prepare oneself in advance, and in the utmost silence, through serious immobilities.” So, for the performance he organized, Cage gathered together a dozen pianists to play the piece a full 840 times, a spectacle which lasted approximately 19 hours. While Alex Ross suggests that “there is no evidence that Satie's instruction was anything more than an arcane jest,” the act of ceaselessly repeating a musical phrase truly physicalizes the “vexations” that Satie was possibly intending to describe. Of the performance, John Cale said, “The head goes first,” illustrating the mind-body connection induced by the Satie piece and which Lee also fosters via his thorny guitar lines. In his review of a 2012 performance, Mark Swed said of “Vexations” that “it [‘Vexations’] teaches you...the difference between a concept and an experience,” and the same holds true of “Thread.”

“Thread and Fray” is the first song on the album to highlight a single voice amongst the three singers. Whereas in “Airlift,” the voices functioned as essentially one unit, “Thread and

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95 “Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite se motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses.” Satie (1969).
96 Schonberg, Shepard, and Ericson (1963).
97 Ross (1993).
98 Schonberg, Shepard, and Ericson (1963).
“Fray” is punctuated by solo moments. The mezzo voice enters in measure 38 and sings alone until measure 44 when the alto enters, followed shortly by the soprano in measure 45. In measure 64, the soprano is the first voice to drop back out, and then halfway through 68, the alto also drops out, and the mezzo is the last voice standing at the moment of transition into “Fray,” at measure 69. This is all an expression of lack of unity, as well as an illustration of the title of the song; the voices are each a single thread, and are “frayed,” a non-cohesive unit. Throughout the opening material, the woman that Lee thinks of as his “three-headed siren” splits off into three unique voices, all taking turns in leading and supporting roles.

When the voices once again enter in measure 75 after the transition over the “Fray,” they sing together and uphold the homophonic texture until measure 89 when the mezzo voice once again gears up to break free on text dealing with loss. In the second half of measure 89, the mezzo crosses over the soprano voice, and then goes on to sing solo “As they [moments] fall through your fingers,” which contrasts with the more positive sounding “Hold onto moments,” in measure 75. Then, in measure 99, the soprano voice gets a solo moment, ushering in a contrapuntal section that spans five measures until measure 104, at which point the mezzo gets away again, but only for a moment, as the other two voices reenter in measure 106. As in “Airlift,” “Thread and Fray” also includes sections using hocket for much the same purpose, although in this instance, the parts are less involved, spanning only short sections, from measures 100 through 104, 110 through 112, and 119 through 123. In measure 152, the song ends the same way it began: the mezzo sings alone after the soprano and alto drop out. Her isolation sets the mood for the following track, a guitar solo entitled “Dying in Waves.”
“Dying in Waves” is Lee’s “personal response to the idea of the ‘guitar solo’ and its place in rock music. ‘Dying in Waves’...is really an homage to Mr. [Jimmy] Page,“100 and it came out of a lick that Lee liked to play, and eventually built upon.”101 As in “Thread and Fray,” which are in actuality two separate tracks on the album but are treated as one, “Dying in Waves,” and the following track, “Distance,” also belong together. Lee says, “‘Distance’ is really just ‘Dying in Waves’ with the band. The harmonic progression and the motives are all essentially the same.”102 The title of this track was inspired by the chords at the end of the piece starting in measure 38.

Lee says, “The big diminuendo at the end...reminded me of the way ripples on water after a splash always eventually...die out. Also, it’s...a sad, lonely little piece.”103 Dying ripples in water as a metaphor for the insignificance of his problems, or the eternity of the planet’s bodies of water recurs throughout this cycle: we first encounter this idea at the end of “Airlift,” when we hear the words, “Such small and violent ripples in a large and violent sea of neutrality;” then, in “Thread and Fray,” the first line is, “Both time and rivers–they both flow forever;” we then move on to “Dying in Waves,” which evokes similar images; and, the final song in The Knells Part I is “Distance,” which closes with a picture of the protagonist futilely chasing waves that are always just out of reach: “Forever disintegrating like the fading sheen of brine on sand.”

“Dying in Waves” also uses looping, although the loops in this case are prerecorded. Lee uses these loops to essentially play a canon with himself and allow the music to ebb and flow, like ripples in water (see Example 3.12). The piece opens with a looper, followed by a second looper playing the same notes two beats later, and then Lee comes in live on guitar playing the

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100 Lee (2013).
101 Lee, text message to author 8/23/17.
102 Lee (2013).
103 Lee, text message to author, 8/23/17.
same notes another two beats later. The repetition of material within a short timeframe harks back to earlier pieces within the cycle, again speaking to the obsessive nature of the protagonist’s thoughts. Further, Lee’s choice to write this piece for solo guitar and looper speaks to a strong sense of isolation: the makeup of the band could have allowed for Guitars One and Two to play together, and the third line could have been either a loop or another instrument; however, Lee chooses to write this piece for a single player alone on the stage and what are essentially echoes of himself. There is an undeniable hyper-focus on the self, in spite of the title’s call for the protagonist to see his struggles in a larger context. It is, of course, an intricate showpiece, but it is inwardly focused and built upon riffs that Lee has spent his whole life playing because they simply feel good in his hands, not written out of a need to present a bravura guitar solo. Living with depression has put Lee in the position of being able to compose and be productive out of a desire to feel good, as in playing these lines. As “Thread and Fray” sought to physicalize the discomfort of living in a depressed space, “Dying in Waves” seeks to find some solace in an otherwise uncomfortable position.
Example 3.12. Measures 1–6, electric guitar and loopers, “Dying in Waves,” Lee plays what is essentially a canon with himself, repeating material in two separate loops and then playing it live.

Out of this inwardly focused solo piece springs “Distance,” the last track on *The Knells* Part I. “Distance” reiterates the same chord progressions and melodic lines as “Dying in
Waves,” but also engages the band. “Distance” is a fitting end to The Knells Part I in that it integrates many of the features of the previous tracks, including textual themes and compositional techniques. For example, in this song, the text deals with the same isolation that first began to rear its head in “Thread and Fray.” In “Thread and Fray,” the three voices began to separate, with the mezzo breaking free of the other two voices several times; then, Lee expounded upon those feelings of isolation for a full four and a half minutes of solo playing; and in “Distance,” his text finally states outright that we are all essentially alone: “Half the distance between us all– half is all the one can hope to travel.” Lee says he was inspired by the idea of the asymptote (a line that a curve approaches as it heads toward infinity)\textsuperscript{104} in mathematics, and that it occurred to him that it was a “beautiful metaphor for the impossibility of perfection, the limits of relationships, the [impossibility of] fulfillment of desire.”\textsuperscript{105} This is clearly a reference to Zeno’s paradox,\textsuperscript{106} which lends itself to obsessive thinking: in the opening pages of Lennard J. Davis’s “Obsession: A History,” the author writes of his own obsessive behavior: “In eating mashed potatoes..., I would create a circle, divide it into four quadrants, eat one quadrant, and then completely remake the food into a slightly smaller circle. And then I would repeat the whole process, as the circle got asymptotically smaller and smaller. In illustrating Zeno’s paradox three dimensionally..., I was always...endlessly caught in my web of...rituals.”\textsuperscript{107} In addition, the vocal part opens by integrating the isolation of the prior two tracks and the confusion of “Airlift”: the

\textsuperscript{104} Pierce (2017).
\textsuperscript{105} Lee (2013).
\textsuperscript{106} "Zeno’s Paradox may be rephrased as follows: Suppose I wish to cross the room. First...I must cover half the distance. Then, I must cover half the remaining distance. Then, I must cover half the remaining distance. Then I must cover half the remaining distance...and so on forever. What this actually does is to make all motion impossible, for before I can cover half the distance I must cover half of the distance, and before I can do that I must cover half of half of half...the distance, and so on, so that in reality I can never move...at all, because doing so involves moving an infinite number of small intermediate distances first.” Smith (2014).
\textsuperscript{107} Davis (2008).
mezzo is alone and the [014] reappears, first in measures 3 and 4, and then later throughout the song, while the meter shifts three times within the first six bars, harking back to and expanding upon the meter shifts in “Airlift.”

Within the vocal part of “Distance,” there is a quality of unrest, with the voices often holding augmented chords, trying to spread as far apart as they can within the framework of their three notes. The soprano and alto often sing the same pitches an octave apart, which is perhaps an illustration of a thwarted attempt to be closer, but not quite managing it.


Hocket also makes an appearance in “Distance” from measure 56 to 63, for much the same reasons as in previous tracks. Lee uses hocket to illustrate his text: “Half is all that you can hope to travel.” Each voice sings only a partial sentence and only a partial musical line, literally
traveling only halfway to its destination, and shedding more light on the protagonist’s state of mind.

Example 3.14. Measures 56–62, vocal part, “Distance.” This song, like the previous tracks, also includes a hocket section.

As in “Airlift,” there is voice crossing toward the end of “Distance,” highlighting the further separation the voices have endured since “Airlift.” In measure 195, the voice crossing is the most extreme it has been throughout the cycle, with the soprano voice sitting below both the mezzo and alto; that is, here, at the middle of the song cycle, the soprano voice is at its most lost, and scraping the bottom of the tessitura of the cycle. At the middle of the piece, Lee has introduced
all the techniques that he will use for the remainder of *The Knells*, and throughout the remaining tracks, he will deploy them for purposes of both development and expansion.

The next track on the album is entitled “Synchromesh,” and it features a thorny, psychedelia-infused text simultaneously heavy on both disillusionment and hope. The song exists in four parts separated by instrumental breaks, and, interestingly, not broken up by stanza. The A section encompasses the first seven lines of the first stanza; the B section, the remaining four lines; the C section encompasses the entirety of the second stanza, as well as the first three lines and first five words of the fourth line of the third stanza; and the D section encompasses the last two words of the fourth line of the third stanza, and the fifth line of the third stanza (See Figure 3.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A section</th>
<th>Stanza I:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Returning ropes of sand to stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>only to dissolve among</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wheels in wheels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of ceaseless spinning motion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>under listless deserts,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and with song,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in infinite oceans;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B section</td>
<td>Stanza I continued:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>then joining over again</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>at the inception of another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chronic circle without end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>witnessed by a host of rolling suns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C section</td>
<td>Stanza II:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From the window of an insect eye,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>curling far beyond the point of our perception,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>outside turns itself around within,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clouding the specter of a dim deception.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second opportunities are always in supply, take one to double back around and try, it's all the same direction.

Stanza III:
So it goes—
the finish and beginning
of all we know—
to circle endlessly in spirals [all around.]

D section

Stanza III continued:
[to circle endlessly in spirals] all around, crawling, all around.

Figure 3.2. “Synchromesh” Form table.

Lee says that the text of this piece was “inspired by the M.C. Escher drawing of the ants marching round a Möbius strip,” and this is clear in the imagery that Lee invokes.\footnote{Lee, conversation with the author 9/6/17.} This affinity for Escher’s work is unsurprising given how influenced Lee is by the psychedelia of the 1960s and Escher’s association with that scene, and Lee’s penchant for psychedelia-infused imagery on past album covers and as part of The Knells live shows.\footnote{Poole (2015).} Broken down by stanza, the first section of text talks about inanimate, large-scale parts of nature and the futility, and ultimate meaninglessness, of our existence. The text makes references to erosion, the idea of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” and “the process of worlds building, changing, and disintegrating.”\footnote{Lee, conversation with the author 9/6/17.} Lee writes of “ropes of sand,” “stone,” “infinite oceans,” and “rolling suns.” In this stanza, the protagonist harks back to some of the earthy images present in the first half of the song cycle: “Like the surface of the earth/At the bottom,” “Both time and rivers -/they both flow forever,”
“Like the fading sheen of brine on sand.” In addition to tying different texts of the cycle to one another and invoking the large-scale images of nature in which Lee finds solace through comparison to his own worries, spending time outdoors has been shown to reduce the symptoms of major depression, and Lee, himself, has often turned to nature in times of despair.\(^\text{111}\)

The second stanza explores the sometimes utterly baffling nature of trying to find one’s place in the world, and how small we all are in the larger scope of things. This stanza also begins with a more direct reference to the Escher drawing Lee credits with inspiring the song: “From the window of an insect eye,/curling far beyond the point of our perception....” Lee talks about the image of Escher’s ants marching around the infinite loop of eternity as a metaphor for the human condition, as well as time and the cosmos more generally. This section deals with the seemingly nonsensical way events unfold, and offers the point of view that while there are always opportunities to do better and feel better, ultimately we must all resign ourselves to the same fate.

The third stanza deals with the idea that time always continues to move forward, and lives, planets, and universes continue to begin and end all around us: “The finish and beginning/Of all we know-/to circle endlessly in spirals all around.” This stanza is another example of Lee’s thinking through humanity’s ultimate insignificance in the face of the cosmos.

Musically, Lee sets his text by breaking it up on the smaller-scale, word-by-word meaning. The song opens with Guitar 1 playing a repeating seven-note pattern of sixteenth notes, and then the soprano enters alone (and her first three notes form Lee’s ubiquitous [014]), followed by the mezzo in bar 5, and the alto in bar 9. This opening recalls “Thread and Fray,” wherein the mezzo entered alone, and was joined by the other voices later on; however, in this song there is perhaps slightly more order, as the voices enter from high to low rather than

\(^\text{111}\) Rodriguez (2014).
jumping around. The first seven lines of text, which form the A section of the song, comprise a list of images to describe the fleeting nature of our lives:

\[
\text{Returning ropes of sand to stone,}
\]
\[
\text{only to dissolve among}
\]
\[
\text{wheels in wheels}
\]
\[
\text{of ceaseless spinning motion,}
\]
\[
\text{under listless deserts,}
\]
\[
\text{and with song,}
\]
\[
\text{in infinite oceans;}
\]

Lee illustrates this by giving each voice a short snippet of the text and not allowing for any homophonic singing. The vocal lines flow seamlessly into one another in what might be thought of as a slow-motion version of the hocket present during the first half of *The Knells*, or something akin to the “human lava-lamp” of “Thread and Fray.” The text opens with images of erosion and falling apart, thus the voices are not a cohesive unit, but rather they are also eroding. The next section of text, the end of the first stanza, opens with, “Then joining over again,” and the instrumental interlude between the two sections bears out the meaning of the text: the texture thickens, Guitar 1 enters, the string quartet enters, and then, finally the drums enter, ushering in a new, homophonic section in a warm C-mixolydian. As the text talks about “joining over again,” the singers do, in fact, join together, singing a full eighteen measures of homophony. Out of this lusher section comes a separation of the voices, moving from highest to lowest voice: the soprano opens with a small solo, then the mezzo has a solo moment before the soprano reenters, and then the alto has a solo moment, before the mezzo and then the soprano enter. The voices
take their solos moving in order from top to bottom, but interject into one another’s solos in order from bottom to top, in a sense, canceling out the cascade effect and further illustrating the text’s point that no matter what the protagonist does or how the voices attempt to subvert their places in the homophonic texture, the outcome, that is, effectively, homophony, is unavoidable. This ties back in with the idea of the almost obligatory chromaticism of “Thread and Fray,” wherein the chromaticism is so enmeshed with the diatonic harmony that it is inescapable.

This brings us to the next section of text, which is, predictably, another few bars of homophony. This section of text reads, “So it goes –/ the finish and beginning/ of all we know –/ to circle endlessly in spirals,” and this plays out musically in Lee’s use of the looper pedal, which is employed extensively in this song, and in revolving rhythmic patterns that Lee writes into the vocal part in the very next section. The voices begin on the second dotted eighth note of measure 91, cycling through a 22-eighth-note-long pattern three times, and on the fourth repetition the pattern begins the same way for the first six eighth-notes, and then diverges in order to bring the song to an end. This section of “Synchromesh” is written in 6/8 and 9/8, and since twenty-two is not divisible by three, the pattern begins on a different part of the beat with each entrance by default. Through his use of a rhythmic cycle, Lee illustrates the “circl[ing] endlessly in spirals” that his text describes. Further, the rhythm actually supports what is happening vocally: just prior to this section, as described above, the voices spiraled around themselves entering from high to low, but interjecting into one another’s solo lines from low to high. During the following section, the soprano and alto both operate within a melodic line spanning the distance of a major third, while the alto’s melody spans the distance of the minor sixth, the inverse of a major third, as if, in this section, the alto voice is taking on the role of the
lost soprano of prior tracks and pulling away from the other two voices. Further evidence of this is that Lee’s ubiquitous major/minor [014] this time appears only in the alto voice during this section on the word “crawling.” The idea of organizing notes in a tightly structured way harks back to Lee’s use of hocket in “Airlift,” and here in “Synchromesh,” the organization reaches even greater depths.

The next track on the album is “Seethe.” This lugubrious song, as the title indicates, delves into the feelings of rage that Lee has found accompany his depression. The voices enter separately in this track, starting with the mezzo, who is then joined by the soprano, and last, the alto. Again, there is an isolation that comes through when the voices are separated, and this adds to the affect of the text. Of this track, Lee says that he is “fascinated by the idea of ‘deep sentiment’ being delivered in a cool, ironically dispassionate way,” and this dovetails with the idea, discussed previously, that Lee, as an expression of his alienation, is outsourcing his need for emotional release to the singers and then hampering their ability to effectively emote.\footnote{Lee (2013)}

This song also includes what might be thought of as slow-motion hocket, wherein the singers come in and sing parts of lines to be finished by the others, as shown in Example 3.15.
Example 3.15. Measures 16–18, vocal part, “Seethe,” This song includes material that functions as a slowed-down hocket, wherein unfinished lines are held out while the other voices continue the text. The soprano never finishes the line, but continues to hold her note on the word “gone.”

In this song, there is much more in the way of staggered entrances and phrase endings than in any other track. “Seethe” comes at approximately the halfway point of the cycle, so it is plausible that the voices are at the height of their isolation and these staggered entrances are an expression of that. Further, in this song, all three voices sit in a much more comfortable tessitura than in any other, perhaps speaking to the comfort of isolation and the feeling of settling into discomfort. In fact, in this track, the alto employs rather heavy vibrato in her solo line, unlike in any other track: she is expressing comfort in discomfort. The track ends in silence, with a fermata over the drum line. The drum obviously cannot sustain a pitch, thus it seems that the fermata is simply a gesture, asking the drummer to sustain what he cannot sustain, much in the way a depressed individual is often unable to fulfill the requirements of a basic daily life.  

Out of the silence of the drum’s fermata come he next track, “Dissolve,” which, in contrast to the silence of a “sustained” drum, contains heavy percussion. Note that since the

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113 Mayo Clinic Staff (2017)
release of *The Knells*, however, Lee has cut this song from the cycle and no longer performs it. There are many reasons why this decision was made, not least of them the practicality of including even more percussion in an already percussion-heavy live show—this track includes bongos and an udu—and the need to use a click track, which can be challenging to work with, to keep the band playing together. The most salient point about this decision from the point of view of Disability Studies, however, in that in this song, and only this song, Lee’s [014] is “corrected,” as shown in Example 3.16.


This was clearly not the deciding factor in the decision over whether or not to include the song going forward, but it does speak to some conflict over the way the piece fits in with the rest of the album, thus including it in the cycle moving forward would bring the cycle to a premature conclusion.

Next on the album comes “Spiral Proem,” which leads into the final track, “Spiral Knells.” Like “Thread and Fray,” these two tracks appear to be separate items on the album, but really operate as one unit, with “Spiral Proem” comprising introductory material (as indicated by the title) and “Spiral Knells” acting as the song proper. In fact, in the score, both pieces are labeled “Spiral Knells,” with “Spiral Proem” as a subheading, and “Spiral Knells” as a second
subheading later in the piece. As with “Thread and Fray,” I will treat “Spiral Proem” and “Spiral Knells” as one track.

“Spiral Proem/Spiral Knells” opens by throwing a wrench into a motif we have been tracking for the whole of the cycle. As shown in Example 3.17, Guitar 2 plays four pitches and they sound familiar, but different: it is the [014] with an added pitch, transforming it into an [0236].

One possible interpretation is that this is representative of an overflow of emotion that a simple overlaid major/minor third cannot account for. The [014] does, in fact, return during the introduction, however, it appears as background material in the strings and is harder to detect; perhaps Lee is exploring the expansion by showing the [014] just after the [0236]. As the protagonist reaches the end of his journey, emotions are heightened and there is so much to say that the motif expands, as does the sheer length of the song; “Spiral Proem/Spiral Knells” is almost twice as long as any other track on the album, comprising nearly one quarter of the material in this cycle. Throughout the introductory material, the time signature is difficult to detect and feels improvisatory, despite being written out. During this preamble to the actual song, Lee rehearses many of the same ideas that he has explored throughout prior tracks: the
opening is a solo guitar line akin the lonely soprano of earlier tracks; Guitars One and Two circle around each other, reflecting a descending triplet motif off one another, simultaneously moving but not really going anywhere, illustrating more of the desire to press forward despite the inability; and the time signatures are unstable, creating a sense of restlessness and discontent.

“Spiral Knells” begins at measure 61 in 4/4. The voices enter on beat two of measure 61 riffing on the spiraling motif of the two guitars of “Spiral Proem.” Lee has disguised the meter, however, so that even the discerning listener would never know the voices had not entered on beat one, since beat two sounds more like a downbeat. This illustrates an inherent instability in the music, which is further complicated by uneven phrase lengths, making it challenging to follow where the downbeat is at any given time. A further complicating factor is how sectional this song is: at measure 79, the meter shifts to 5/4 and then immediately into 7/8 for four measures and then back into 4/4, ushering in mellow transitional material that takes us into the longest hocket passage of the cycle. This section mirrors some of the imagery of “Synchromesh,” and the picture of ants marching around a Möbius strip for all of eternity:

Up on an infinite stairway –
Always up,
Never down (down is up),
Never up (up is down),
Always down –
In our ouroboric haste,
Somewhere going nowhere.
The following section opens with two staggered entrances in a row, as in “Seethe,” and then moves into a transitional section that leads to another short hocket section, followed by another staggered entrance section, and yet another hocket section. The quick shifting between compositional styles seems to suggest a frantic attempt to find some mode of expression that works or some way to achieve relief, but it is all for naught.

The track ends with the singers not even forming words, but cutting out on an “Oh” leading into humming. The guitars have the last word, getting slower and slower and quieter and quieter. By the end of the cycle, the ubiquitous [014] that morphed into an [0236] has receded into nothing more than on an [01] dyad.

There is clearly a case to be made that while Lee was not necessarily intending to write a song cycle specifically about his depression, his state of mind has placed him into a productive and creative space wherein certain attributes of his depression may be found in his musical writing. Lee’s texts and style, as well as the compositional techniques he employs all point to a work that has been made possible by the composer’s depression, and which would likely not exist in its current form if not for that.
THE FINISH AND THE BEGINNING:

CONCLUSION

The goal of this dissertation has been to provide readers with a clear musical and poetic analysis of The Knells, as well as to classify and contextualize Lee’s work, and to further explicate how viewing a musical analysis through the lens of Disability Studies may provide relevant insights into the compositional structure of the music, as well as the productive space that disability may grant. Andrew McKenna Lee is an important figure in the new music community, yet this is the only analysis of any of his works that exists to date; hopefully, this dissertation will make his work more accessible and easier to digest, as well as provide others wishing to perform this particular work with a starting point that might not be possible to find without working in close proximity to the composer.

This final chapter provides other pieces of information and insight that did not have a home throughout the rest of the dissertation, such as the performance history of The Knells and information about public reception and response to the album. The first performance of any material that ultimately found its way into The Knells was in 2011 at a small venue in Queens. Although versions of this material (as well as the drummer and bassist) did ultimately end up on the 2013 album, Lee does not think of this early, disastrous performance as a part of The Knells’ history—Lee was still getting his bearings with the music and very much in the throes of trying to put together the final version of the ensemble.

The Knells’ first official performance was a low-stakes gig in July of 2013, playing for Ecstatic Dance NYC at Brooklyn’s famed new music venue, Roulette. The Knells’ mezzo at the
time, Amanda Gregory, who was trying her hand at curating events, was in charge of the booking, which consisted of providing live musical accompaniment for the members of Ecstatic Dance, who come together at these events to dance and move without judgment in a substance-free space. This first show was important because it gave the band a final push toward memorizing the material, getting into low-key costumes consisting of legging and leotards in the case of the singers, and performing in an environment where the audience was deeply invested in finding a groove with the band.

Several months later, in March, the group had another opportunity to play, this time at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in New York City as part of the now-defunct NYSoundCircuit series. This performance did not include the full band and the singers sang unamplified. This gig only included Lee and Orbell on guitar with the singers, and the pared-down group performed only three songs: “Airlift,” “Thread and Fray,” and “Seethe.” In the context of this concert, the group was presented as more of a new music group, sharing the bill with a host of other classical chamber groups. While the band was preparing for this smaller show, Lee was busy arranging “Thread and Fray,” for SSATB choir, electric guitar, vibraphone, crotales, cello, and double bass, in order to submit it to the American Composers Forum Essentially Choral program. His piece was selected, allowing Lee to workshop his song with a professional 32-voice choir and ensemble, as well as to make contact with the program’s mentors, Francisco Nuñez, who directed The Young People’s Chorus of NYC. Of the reasoning behind submitting to this workshop, Lee explained that “one of my dreams for this project is for us to perform it one day with a string orchestra and a treble choir, the latter group essentially functioning as ‘backup singers’ to our solo trio. Naturally, the YPC are exactly who I had in
Since 2013, Lee has changed course and Knells II has actually become more pared down and less complicated; however, it is interesting to note that the level of complexity and the number of musicians involved in the early stages of this project were, for Lee, not even the tip of the iceberg of what he imagined it would become. With the release of the first album and the process of booking performances around it, Lee discovered that because his music is such an intense hybridization of different styles, and, frankly, because the group is so large, finding appropriate venues was a challenge: The Knells was not quite “rock” enough to garner deep interest from that community and was a little too “rock” for more classically-oriented venues. This, of course, speaks to how Lee’s song cycle and the way he has structured his band have actually played out some of the exact difficulties that Lee explores in his texts. The group did play several shows at rock venues such as Brooklyn’s Glasslands, but these smaller venues often lacked not only high enough quality sound systems for the close harmonies Lee wrote, but also lacked space for an eight-person ensemble. On the other hand, many of the shows at more classically-oriented venues did not have quite the right feel for a rock ensemble. The resultant difficulty that Lee had with marketing The Knells, as well as a change in his personal preference, caused Lee to reverse course and simplify the music, moving away from working with a background chorus. Lee still harbors hope that an opportunity to work on that larger scale will one day present itself, but until then, he is content with direction in which The Knells is moving.

Regarding future research or analytical directions, Lee and his music continue to evolve, and his band has recently released a second album, of which Lee writes: “Most of the album is...preoccupied with death to some extent, but it has become clear to me that in writing about it,

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I am simply trying to reconcile the experience of losing my father as a child with my desire, as a man in my early 40s, to leave the gloom behind and appreciate the otherwise fortunate circumstances of my existence. Many of the songs are double-edged swords, so to speak, that seek a path towards emotional reconciliation — a more appreciative perspective on life — in spite of their immediate facades about pain and struggle.”

With this in mind, a future analysis of this album through the Disability Studies lens, as well as a comparison with the first 2013 album, feels relevant and important. Lee writes of several concrete compositional differences:

“There are several...significant differences between Knells II and the first album. Musically speaking, the songs themselves are simpler, but the overall form of the album — which is a large, symmetrical arch — feels more effective and cohesive as a single, unified statement. Generally, the album feels more direct than the first one: it’s less flowery and more earthy [sic]. There is less musical artifice, and the musical themes are...more emotionally straightforward and less veiled.”

This all serves to offer guidance as to how to proceed moving forward with an analysis of the second album.

Regarding future directions as it applies to further performances of this work and others written for The Knells, it seems clear that there will be greater demand for a highly accurate and very pure vocal sound. Lee has continued the tradition of bridging the gap between early music performance practice vocal style and contemporary classical music vocal style; in his performance notes to Tehillim, Reich called this a “natural voice,” akin to one that does well singing the music of the Baroque and Renaissance, and Lee calls it a “casual sound,” but regardless of the terminology applied, these composers ask for a very specific sound, and as

115 Lee, email message to author on October 5, 2017.
116 Ibid.
Lee’s work continues to be pared down to a more and more barebones aesthetic, the need for a light, *non vibrato* sound will continue to increase.

The compositions that Lee is currently working on today continue to grapple with many of the same themes as *The Knells*, and he continues to try to incorporate his love for multiple musical styles into his pieces. Lee’s most recent work other than *Knells II*, a piece for chamber orchestra and soprano and mezzo, *Black Pool*, deals with death, self-reflection (both literally and metaphorically), and, interestingly, began with the idea of water and what it can symbolize, as in *Dying in Waves*. Also as in *The Knells*, Lee wrote his own text for *Black Pool*, and the work fuses influences ranging from Bach to Pink Floyd. It seems that taking complete control of his creative output has always been part of Lee’s work, and genre-blending appears in pieces from many different points in his career. Given how self-reflective his work is and how much thematic similarity is present, this dissertation will hopefully provide a launching pad for future analyses. This music is very rich and there is still much to be gained from further study.

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\textsuperscript{117} *Black Pool* was commissioned by the Albany Symphony for their chamber orchestra/new music ensemble, The Dogs of Desire, and premiered on June 2, 2017.
1. Airlift

Soulless as a tomb —
solace never comes too soon.
Every single one,
fortune sparing none,
heads above water
like crustaceans in a bucket
climbing up the wall.
To try and float above
that moment when gravity leaves us
with no depth further left to fall.
Two dimensional —
like the surface of the earth
at the bottom.

Crack it open,
crack it open like an egg.

You can sense an ocean,
but you're a ship in a bottle,
or a snow globe locked in a desert,
or a lighthouse without fog,
or a gear without a cog —
or your mind is like a dog
going around in circles,
not knowing whether to lie down,
or to chase his tail into the ground.

Such small ripples,
in a large and violent sea of neutrality.

2. Thread and Fray

Both time and rivers —
they both flow forever.
One through vale and memory fractured,
the other from the ocean skyward
to fall towards the end of all that is.

Hold on to moments —
you can pause, grasp, gaze, and linger,
only to watch as they fall through your fingers
like fine sand and silt,
or water.

Horizons forever drawn —
then forever gone.
If only we could choose
to make a minute (just a minute) longer
for a second or two seconds maybe more,
we could suspend our flowing fast
while the world goes on and on
in eternal threads and frays.

All knotted chords and entwining coils
of kinetic time — even
if only to begin again —
in the end must first unwind.

3. Dying in Waves (instrumental)

4. Distance

Half the distance between us all — half is all
that one can hope to travel.
So close, but yet perpetual — half is all that you
can ever hope to go.
So close, it may even seem eventual — but half
is all that you will ever endeavor to move.
Half the distance between us all — half is all
that one can hope to travel.
So close, but yet perpetual — forever fleeting,
like the retreating sheen of brine on sand.

4. Synchromesh

Returning ropes of sand to stone,
only to dissolve among
wheels in wheels
of ceaseless spinning motion
under listless deserts,
and with song,
in infinite oceans;
then joining over again
at the inception of another
chronic circle without end,
witnessed by a host of rolling suns.

From the window of an insect eye,
curling far beyond the point of our perception,
outside turns itself around within,
clouding the specter of a dim deception.

Second opportunities are always in supply,
take one to double back around and try,
it's all the same direction.

So it goes—
the finish and beginning
of all we know—
to circle endlessly in spirals all around,
crawling, all around.

5. Seethe

“All in time” —
they say it all takes time
to leave the trouble you've gone through
far behind.

But, after it's gone,
it goes on to blight and blister.
Even now it seethes,
waxing pallors of infection,
while the scab it rips undone.
It's never over — it's never gone.

Time dispels the ones who
in desperation cling to
platitudes they don't see through

all in time.

All in time?
Not so sure.

6. Dissolve

Light decaying and fading,
then braiding in resonant ringing echoes.
Cold careening through an airless black,
and shattering the famished quiet,
Illuminating the violence,
that only compares with its splendor.

Always to dissolve.
All our eyes are drawn towards you.

Always to dissolve.

7. Spiral Proem/Spiral Knells

One after the other —
climb and fall
over and under
on endless conveyor belt ladders,
ringing in a spiral knell
within a fury of concentric circles.

Surely when you're on top,
you're on bottom.
Or reverse the negative —
view it from the other way around.

Up on an infinite stairway —
always up,
never down (down is up),
ever up (up is down),
always down —
in ouroboric haste,
somewhere going nowhere.

Slow circles in search of a flicker,
as louder suns
reflect in a hall of mirrors.  
Open and endless,  
nearness to distance  
as always and a moment.

Everything and nothing  
in violent and splendid disarray,  
or ordered in mysterious, symmetrical,  
and simple kinds of ways —  
each a single, certain, prescient  
contradiction of a present  
furling to unfold.

On and off (and off and on)  
and often never (never often)  
just the same —  
endings to beginnings to the end,  
and over and under and over again.

All such strong and fragile threads,  
whirling in a bid  
to forget and know.
APPENDIX II

List of Andrew McKenna Lee’s Works

Knells II (2017) for three singers and rock band

Black Pool (2017) for amplified soprano, mezzo-soprano, and chamber orchestra

Clear Image* (2014) for orchestra

Harlan Variations (2014) for chamber orchestra

All Evil Summer Clowns Must Die (2013) for mixed ensemble

The Knells (2013) for three singers, rock band, and string quartet

A Bottle of Something (2012) for percussion quartet

Thread and Fray (2012) for small ensemble and SATB choir

Jun (2012) for electric guitar and cello

Curio (2011) for classical guitar

Dying in Waves (2011) for electric guitar

Obstinate Snakes! (2010) for saxophone quartet

Prelude, “Vignette” (2010) for classical guitar and percussion

Cracks in the Ice (2009) for string quartet

Laments and Dances, From the Irish** (2009) for two guitars and string orchestra

Five Refractions of a Prelude by Bach (2008) for classical guitar

For Dear Life (2008) for orchestra

One Thought Among Many (2007) for recorded media

Unraveling (2007) for electric guitar, percussion, and looping machine

Like a Sick, Breathing Tambura (2006) for percussion quartet
Raunch (2006) for flute, bass clarinet, electric guitar, piano, and contrabass

Strange Dreams (2006) for orchestra

Sunrise from the Bottom of the Sea (Homage to Jimi Hendrix) (2005) for electric guitar and pre-recorded accompaniment

the dark out of the nighttime (2005) for flute, viola, harp, and guitar


Crazy Improv Madness, Etude No. 1 (2004) for mixed ensemble

Three Pieces for Contrabass (1999, rev. 2004) for contrabass

Soundtrack for a Short Western (2003) for recorded media

Two Pieces for Chamber Ensemble (2003) for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, violin, and cello

I. Arabescata

II. Gravity and Air

Drum Circle (2002) for percussion quartet

Scordatura Suite (2002) for classical guitar

Vortices (2002) for orchestra, with obbligato solo violin and cello

Chamber Concerto (1999) for chamber orchestra

Duet (1998) for violin and cello

Samsara (1997) for orchestra

Theme and Variations (1996) for piano

Three Electronic Pieces (1995) for recorded media

*By Ian Williams, orchestrated and realized by Andrew McKenna Lee

**By Arnold Black, arranged by Andrew McKenna Lee

All works published by Still Sound Music, and available for performance via purchase or rental


———. 2014. “Interview with Composer, Guitarist and Knells founder Andrew McKenna Lee.” Interview by Angel Romero. Progressive Rock Central,


