A DISTANT MUSIC

The Office Next Door

I first met Paul Nauert when I came to the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), in March 2001, to interview for an Assistant Professor of Musicology position. My two-day campus visit included an observation of an undergraduate twentieth-century music history class—the main course for which this new position had been created. For years, the course had been taught by composers in the department—most notably, Gordon Mumma, and later, David Evan Jones, and, on the day in question, Assistant Professor Paul Nauert. That day, he was conducting a review session for the class’s final exam. Working without lecture notes, Paul asked the students to recall major themes of compositions they had studied, as well as analytical details, instrumentation, dates, and other facts. What impressed me most, aside from his obvious command of the history of the repertoire, was his ability to spontaneously demonstrate important themes—their intricate voicings, harmonic twists and turns—at the piano. All of that music was a part of him. He played beautifully by memory from Schoenberg’s Variations for Orchestra, Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms, Berg’s Violin Concerto, and other modernist masterpieces.

At the UCSC Music Center, I moved into the office next door to Paul’s. Our windows looked out over the same meadow, redwood forest, deer, and raptors. An extraordinary theory teacher, I would listen to him explain basic concepts of harmony and counterpoint during his office hours, again demonstrating musical principles with utter clarity at the piano. Bach chorales floated out of his open window and into mine. His students were lucky.

In the summer of 2009, Paul was diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or: “Lou Gehrig’s Disease”). At the time, he was Department Chair; he immediately stepped down in order to focus on managing the disease, and its encroaching limitations. Eventually, the deterioration of his physical condition meant he was no longer able to teach. At the time of this writing, though confronting the severest possible restrictions of mobility, Paul is as brilliant, funny, and mentally active as he ever was. He uses various hardware and software tools to write and compose. (He is currently working on new compositions, as well as a set of course notes designed to teach post-tonal harmony and counterpoint.) This essay has been written with his help, insight, and collaboration.

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These personal remarks about Nauert as a teacher and colleague notwithstanding, this recording is about Nauert the composer. (The “Selected Sources” list at the end provides bibliographic citations for some of Nauert’s major contributions as a theorist, published in Perspectives of New Music, Computer Music Journal, Journal of Music Theory, and Musical Quarterly.) Most of the music on this CD—most composed after his ALS diagnosis, with the exception of three pieces from the late 1990s—represents a freer and more intuitive way of composing, with less reliance on computational tools, than Nauert’s earlier work. He calls Episodes and Elegies and A Distant Music, the larger pieces on this disc, “post-algorithmic composition.”
Nauert grew up in Columbia, Missouri. Since his father was a history professor at the University of Missouri and his mother was a librarian at Stephens College, he enjoyed access to two academic libraries from an early age. Around age ten, he began devouring the contents of those libraries—a somewhat arbitrary selection of books, journals, scores, and recordings. Soon his interests began to lean toward modernism and the avant-garde. He had private piano and composition lessons from a series of teachers who allowed him to experiment with serialism and chance operations alongside more conventional courses of music study.

Nauert went on to earn simultaneous undergraduate degrees in music (Eastman) and electrical engineering (University of Rochester), and a Ph.D. in music theory from Columbia University in 1997 (he began teaching at UCSC in 1996). Nauert’s skills allowed him to be equally comfortable and creative with music, math, and computer programming. Remembering his undergraduate years at Eastman, he singles out Robert Morris for guiding him toward “a deeper understanding of the post-tonal universe.”

During his six years in New York City, he frequented the Joyce Theater, a dance performance venue in Chelsea. He told me that he was even more inspired by the dance performances there than the city’s many musical offerings.

In the past, Nauert’s music has explored many musical ideas, such as algorithmic composition, Markov models of simple rhythmic behaviors, and the avoidance of pulse. (A good example of these ideas can be heard in his piece *Arabesque*, for solo flute [1995].) Other early techniques included looping and interlocking melodic patterns, and harmonies based on coloristic concerns. Focusing on harmonic color as opposed to tonal hierarchy—the traditional relationships between chords and chord progressions—Nauert is able to define formal regions, like phrases, articulated by a variety of options: literal chord changes; change of chord type; the use of chord cycles; change of underlying pitch field; or change of pitch field type. (Good examples of this technique are *Close the Gates of Day* [violin, cello, piano; 1998] and *Chapter and Verse* [alto saxophone, piano; 2003].)

The large pieces on this CD represent Nauert’s “post-algorithmic,” post-diagnosis composition. He writes:

> My music changed in response to the disease. I explored new ideas, new techniques, and points of contact with other music I love (Mel Powell, Harrison Birtwistle—J.S. Bach, in far more abstract terms) out of a sense that these things couldn’t be postponed until later. My customary algorithmic techniques gave way to more intuitive processes, and elaborate compositional designs were replaced by patterns I could retain fully in my memory, as the physical act of composition grew slower, and as my external workspace became limited to my view of the computer screen positioned in front of my eyes by an assistant. No more sketching on paper!

> My desire to write vocal music for the first time since my student years meshed nicely with these changing conditions. Previously, pre-calculating the rhythmic details of a whole piece had been a fundamental part of how I worked, so rendering speech rhythms faithfully and expressively was always problematic. I would have needed new algorithms that could take those linguistic patterns into account.

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1 All quotes are from Nauert unless otherwise indicated. They are taken from a series of written interviews I conducted with him between January and March 2015.
Nauert’s curiosity about exploring new working methods, necessitated by his extreme physical limitations, is profoundly moving. Perhaps he has been reflecting on the advice he used to give his composition graduate students:

Beware of . . .

. . . allowing your compositional “voice” to develop too narrowly around those things you’re able to do with the least effort (or the least risk of failure).

. . . emulating only the aspects of a favorite model that are most easily within your reach—this is the recipe for a “pale imitation.”

. . . becoming so preoccupied with any one method or set of habits that you shut yourself off from other places your imagination might roam.²

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The first piece on this disc, Episodes and Elegies for solo piano (2010), was premiered by Marilyn Nonken (who recorded it here) on October 12, 2011 at New York University’s Frederick Loewe Theatre. It was the second piece Nauert wrote for his friend and New York–based pianist Nonken, the first having been written some ten years earlier (A Collection of Caprices, 2002). Nauert was impressed with what he has called Nonken’s fearlessness “in the face of complex rhythms and finger-tangling passage work,” and as a result, he wrote “an uncharacteristically dense and extroverted score.”³ For the new piece, Nauert placed a greater emphasis on lyrical writing, in order to highlight Nonken’s “equally brilliant abilities as a colorist”—while sacrificing none of the virtuosic demands of the earlier work. Episodes and Elegies, Nauert writes,

is structured around two relatively somber elegies. The first of these is spun out of long, expressive lines, and it suggests a mood of quiet resignation. The second is pieced together from much more fragmentary material, and it offers glimpses of anger and defiance. Four shorter and generally livelier episodes are distributed before and between the two elegies, and a prologue and epilogue frame the entire cycle. These shorter movements often play with different rates of pulsation and with contrasting textures and types of keyboard figuration.⁴

Darwin Street (2010), for solo bass clarinet, and Pathfinding (2011) for solo B-flat clarinet, are both recorded here by clarinetist Paul Miller. The first piece has indirect autobiographical references, explained eloquently by the composer:

For many years I was an avid runner, and my excursions over streets and trails afforded me some of my best “thinking” time. I would think in particular about the experience of traveling through a landscape, a gradually unfolding scene, the

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² Compositional advice included on Nauert’s syllabus for the UCSC graduate seminar MUSC 219 (“Techniques in Composition”).
³ Nauert, program notes for Episodes and Elegies, written for a performance at the April in Santa Cruz Festival of Contemporary Music in 2012.
⁴ Ibid.
impact of each detail and their cumulative effect, and about revisiting a familiar route to find the details and the cumulative effect different each time. And somehow these thoughts were always about music, too—about musical form and the relation of small details to the larger whole. I’ve encountered a “Darwin Street” along some of my favorite running routes in the various towns I’ve lived, and the name sticks in my mind as an emblem for these ideas.5

The work is dedicated to Nauert’s long-time UCSC colleague, the clarinetist John Sackett, who gave its first performance.

The second of the clarinet solos, *Pathfinding*, takes its title from a term used in mathematics and computer science to refer to the metaphoric, yet systematic search for path toward a goal. In this sense it is linked conceptually (though not very literally) with some of the programmatic ideas behind *Darwin Street*, written just one year earlier. Nauert describes the work “as a journey with twists and turns, with the occasional glimpse of a branch not taken, and with a few striking changes of terrain along the way.”6

Composed in 2010, *A Distant Music* was originally scored for tenor, piano, and string quartet, with poetry by Alain Bosquet and Vera Pavlova. It was premiered on November 4, 2011 at UCSC. For this CD, Nauert withdrew the vocal movements when he was unable to obtain copyright permissions for the majority of the poems he had wanted to use, leaving the purely instrumental movements to stand alone as an independent work. The nine string quartet movements heard here were originally conceived as part of the larger cycle, in which they were interspersed between several longer songs for tenor voice (premiered by Nauert’s UCSC colleague Brian Staufenbiel) with piano or string quartet or both.

Standing alone, the nine miniature string quartets—ranging in length from a mere 31” to 3'09”—offer a focused microcosm of the dark and mysterious possibilities of this time-tested sonic combination. Nauert seems to be exploring a particular set of harmonic sonorities as well as textural ideas, ranging from immobile stasis to homorhythmic movement to completely independent layers of polyphony. Suggesting techniques of serialism and dissonant counterpoint—from Schoenberg and Webern to Ruth Crawford Seeger—Nauert draws from the full range of his compositional options and stylistic choices. Sometimes elliptically fragmented, sometimes noisily emphatic, the composer allows the quartet to say what it needs to say with brevity and concision. In the evocative words of Alain Bosquet, one of the excised poets from the larger cycle of *A Distant Music*, these fleeting pieces perhaps allow us “to discover beneath the noise the wings of music.”

Describing the next piece in the recorded collection, Nauert writes: “Frequent hesitations and unpredictable shifts of color and character lend an improvisational quality to *Subtext* [solo guitar [1998]].”7 The music is softly introverted and pretty, though sometimes interrupted by loud and aggressive interjections. Idiomatic references to flamenco or jig-like gestures are briefly heard. Nauert says:

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5 Nauert’s program note for various performances of *Darwin Street*.
6 Nauert’s program note for various performances of *Pathfinding*.
7 Nauert’s program note for various performances of *Subtext*. 
These diverse musical characters are often partially submerged in the abstract discourse of the piece; they surface clearly at certain moments and are only subliminally present during others. Binding all of these musical images together is a consistent harmonic language based on a very slow-moving sequence of pitch fields, each one designed to accommodate one or more of the large chords that often punctuate phrases in the piece.\(^8\)

Nauert admits to having been unfamiliar with the technical constraints of the guitar while composing \textit{Subtext}, especially with regard to left-hand fingerling. In an unorthodox but creative attempt to remedy that situation, Nauert made a life-size cardboard replica of a guitar fingerboard. Folding it in half and stashing it in his backpack, he was able to consult it whenever he wanted to work on the piece. Today, he admits “I’m proud that all the big chords in the piece turned out to be playable, although I have been told no experienced guitarist would actually use the fingering that I imagined for a few of them.”

\textit{Two Miniatures} (2012), for B-flat clarinet and piano, were written for a longstanding patron of the UCSC Music Department (and the Wind Ensemble in particular): an economics professor for forty-six years, who also is a clarinetist. Nauert’s celebratory composition bears the dedication: “In honor of David Kaun, on the occasion of his retirement, and with gratitude for his generous support of music and the arts at UCSC.”

\textit{Flight Path} and \textit{Soaring} (1999), both for flute and piano, were recorded by Leta Miller (flute) and the composer at the piano. They are dedicated to Miller, Nauert’s colleague at UCSC. Nauert notes that there is a parallel between \textit{Darwin Street} and \textit{Flight Path}, because both were originally conceived as stand-alone pieces, and were only later paired with companion pieces. In this case, \textit{Soaring} was composed so he and Miller would have something new to play on a recital they gave together in April 2000; soon after they made the studio recordings featured here. The title \textit{Flight Path} alludes to a recurrent ascending gesture, heard at the beginning. Nauert envisions it as “a flash across the sky, observed from the ground,” while \textit{Soaring} suggests “a more sustained, lyrical” mood, or “an embodied image of flight.” It is also a reference to Robert Schumann’s piano piece “Aufschwung” (the second piece in the set \textit{Phantasiestücke}, op. 12), though Nauert notes that no musical quotation is included.

In closing, I’d like to allow an old friend and featured performer on this CD, Marilyn Nonken, to speak on behalf of Nauert and his music:

I met Paul in the late 1980s, when we were undergraduates at the Eastman School. Paul was already a very intense, heavily hyphenated character: a composer-theorist-pianist with interests and talents that transcended any academic “major.” I was a pianist-theorist of sorts. We shared friends and ideas. One day, he walked me through sketches for \textit{Serif/Sans serif}, a work for solo violin on which he’d been working, and I marveled over how he generated his materials, trying to fathom all the tiny details so key to his conception of the music and its notation. I was just seventeen, and he couldn’t have been much older. It was one of the first times I’d discussed musical composition with a composer my own age. I know that our early discussions left me a sense of empathy with the composer, and a solemn respect for the new, frail score.

\(^8\) Ibid.
As we found ourselves in graduate school together at Columbia (early 1990s), Paul’s ideas had become more refined and concise. There was always a sophistication to his music and writings on music, yet their initial opacity wasn’t off-putting, but intriguing. A few years later, I toured with *A Collection of Caprices*, and I played it when we found ourselves together again in Paris in 2003, at the slightly bizarre IRCAM conference, “Autour de la Set Theory.” To me, *A Collection of Caprices* is a love letter to Mel Powell and his fellow, mellow atonalists, who loved jazz as well as Schoenberg and Webern. The *Collection* seems a direct descendant of Zemlinsky’s settings of Langston Hughes, Babbitt’s *All Set*, and Martirano’s *Cocktail Music*, capturing the easy elegance and unself-conscious incongruity of Schoenberg and Gershwin in their tennis whites. It’s a kind of music that perhaps has never been “in vogue,” but is always a total pleasure, for those lucky enough to discover it.⁹

—Amy C. Beal

Amy C. Beal is Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of three books: *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (2006), *Carla Bley* (2011), and *Johanna Beyer* (2015). She is also the author of numerous liner notes for New World Records and serves on the Board of Trustees.

**Paul Nauert** (b. 1966) began activities in composition and piano performance around the age of ten, and received national awards in composition from MTNA and BMI during his pre-college career. He holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music, where he was awarded the McCurdy Prize in composition, and Columbia University, where he earned his Ph.D. in music theory in 1997 with the assistance of a Mellon Foundation Fellowship. In 1996, he joined the music faculty of the University of California, Santa Cruz, teaching music theory and composition there until his retirement in 2014.

Nauert’s compositions, mainly for solo and small-ensemble forces, reflect an ongoing interest in intimate/private discourse as a model for musical rhetoric, the coloristic use of harmony, and an engagement with different qualities of pulsation and its absence. His music has been performed at venues such as New York’s Merkin Hall, Miller Theater, and Works and Process at the Guggenheim Museum, as well as the BGSU New Music & Art Festival in Ohio, the SoundField Festival in Chicago, Resonances at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Stuttgart International Guitar Festival.

Nauert is also known for his music-theoretical work on rhythm, post-tonal harmony, and other topics, which has appeared in such publications as *Computer Music Journal*, *Journal of Music Theory*, *Musical Quarterly*, and *Perspectives of New Music*. Long associated with The Walden School, he taught for several years in the Young Musicians Program and edited *The Walden School Musicianship Course: A Manual for Teachers* (2001). He has created software applications for computer-assisted composition, including contributions to IRCAM’s OpenMusic project.

Born in Croatia, raised in Chicago, and based in San Francisco, violist **Ivo Bokulic** is associate principal of the San José Chamber Orchestra, and also performs with the Utah Festival Opera,

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⁹ Nonken shared with me these beautiful and thoughtful remarks via email on February 7, 2015.
Reno Chamber Orchestra and Reno Philharmonic, Santa Rosa Symphony, Merced Symphony, Opera Paralléle, and Masterworks Chorale. As a member of San Francisco’s Magik*Magik Orchestra, Bokulic has toured, recorded, and performed with acts such as Death Cab for Cutie, Sting, Chicago, and Third Eye Blind. He holds both Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he studied with Jodi Levitz.

**Roy Malan** is the principal violinist of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and was for many years the concertmaster of the San Francisco Ballet. He is the founding director of the Telluride Chamber Music Festival and has performed worldwide as a soloist and as a member of the Stanford String Quartet, the Ives Quartet, and other ensembles. He is also widely recorded on Genesis, Orion, and other labels. Educated at London’s Royal Academy of Music under Yehudi Menuhin, Malan also attended Juilliard and the Curtis Institute, where he was a student of Ivan Galamian and Efrem Zimbalist. He is the author of *Efrem Zimbalist: A Life*, published by Amadeus Press.

**Leta Miller**, Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is both a musicologist and flutist. As a performer she has been featured on fifteen recordings on renaissance, baroque, and modern flute. As a scholar, she specializes in the music of twentieth-century America, and has published books and articles on Lou Harrison, John Cage, Henry Cowell, Aaron Jay Kernis, and others. Her book *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War* was published by UC Press in 2011.

**Paul Miller** has enjoyed a widely varied career as a clarinetist. After undergraduate studies at the University of California, he joined the US Marine Corps as a bandsman. Following his honorable discharge, he moved to San Francisco to pursue graduate studies in clarinet performance at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he studied with Luis Baez. Miller has performed with a number of ensembles including San Francisco Symphony, Monterey Symphony, Fresno Symphony, Ensemble Paralléle, La Jolla Symphony, and San Francisco Academy Orchestra. He currently resides in San Diego, where he plays chamber music and maintains a private teaching studio.

**Marilyn Nonken** commands a repertoire comprising the complete piano music of Schoenberg and Boulez, as well as works by pioneers of the New York School (Feldman, Wolff, Lucier), the New Complexity (Dillon, Eckardt, Ferneyhough, Finnissy) and *musique spectral* (Dufourt, Fineberg, Murail, Vivier). She champions the works of young Americans Drew Baker, Lou Bunk, Richard Carrick, Victoria Cheah, Christopher Trapani, and Nina C. Young, and collaborates as a duo pianist with Peter Hill, Joseph Kubera, and Sarah Rothenberg. Recent releases include her monograph *The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age* (Cambridge), *Voix Voilées: Spectral Music for Piano* (Metier) and *Subject* (Tzadik). She has also recorded for New World, Lovely Music, Albany, Divine Art, Innova, CRI, BMOP Sound, New Focus, Kairos, Mode, and Bridge. Ms. Nonken is a Steinway Artist and Director of Piano Studies at NYU Steinhardt.

**Carl Pantle** is a vocal coach, accompanist, and singer who frequently works with the San Francisco Opera Center, West Bay Opera, Opera San Jose, and the Bay Area Summer Opera Theatre Institute. An alumnus of the prestigious Merola Program at the San Francisco Opera Center, he studied at Brigham Young University before returning to the Bay Area to pursue a
Masters Degree in vocal coaching and accompanying at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Pantle is the Principal Accompanist for the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus, has appeared as a soloist with SFGMC on numerous occasions, and appeared at Lincoln Center as accompanist for Dr. Timothy Seelig in *The Wisdom of Old Turtle* in 2011. As a pianist, he has collaborated with Daniel Reichard, Keala Settle, Julia Murney, Alysha Umphress, Laura Benanti, and other Broadway talents.

**Kevin Rogers** attended the University of South Carolina and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he earned his Bachelors and Masters degrees. He made his solo debut at the age of sixteen and has been a featured soloist with Opera Parallèle, the Mendocino Music Festival Chamber Orchestra, the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus, and Post:Ballet. He is a founding member of the Friction Quartet, which has studied with the St. Lawrence String Quartet and the Muir Quartet, and performed across the United States. Major teachers include Dr. William Terwilliger, Nan Hudson, Bettina Mussumeli, Jodi Levitz, Jennifer Culp, and Mark Sokol.

**Vanessa Ruotolo** received her musical training from the New England Conservatory, Boston University, and San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She is affiliated with the Santa Rosa Symphony, San Jose Chamber Orchestra, Midsummer Mozart Festival Orchestra, Skywalker Sound Orchestra, California Symphony, Quartet Rouge, and the Worn Chamber Ensemble. She has performed with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, Berkeley Contemporary Players, Empyrean Ensemble, Eco Ensemble, San Francisco Ballet, and Shorenstein Hays Nederlander. Ruotolo teaches on the faculty of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

**David Tanenbaum** has performed in more than forty countries and has been a soloist with prominent orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra and London Sinfonietta. Among the many works composed for him are Hans Werner Henze’s guitar concerto, *An Eine Äolsharfe*, which he recorded with the composer conducting; four works by Pulitzer Prize-winner Aaron Jay Kernis and pieces by Terry Riley, Lou Harrison, and Roberto Sierra. Tanenbaum can be heard on more than thirty recordings on EMI, New Albion, Naxos, and other labels. His Nonesuch recording as soloist in John Adams’s *Naive and Sentimental Music* was nominated for a 2002 Grammy for “Best New Composition.” Tanenbaum is Chair of the Guitar Department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He is a member of the Pacific Guitar Ensemble and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players.

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Producers: Paul Nauert, Brian Staufenbiel
Engineers: William Coulter (tracks 1–19, 21, 22), Gregory Squires (tracks 20, 23, 24)
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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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PAUL NAUERT (b. 1966)

*A DISTANT MUSIC*

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*Episodes & Elegies* (2010)  20:02
1. Prologue  1:14
2. Episode I  2:28
3. Episode II  3:25
4. Elegy I  5:44
5. Episode III  1:33
6. Episode IV  1:52
7. Elegy II  2:17
8. Epilogue  1:07

Marilyn Nonken, piano


Paul Miller, clarinets

11. Quartet I  1:07
12. Quartet II  1:30
13. Quartet III  :59
14. Quartet IV  1:10
15. Quartet V  1:21
16. Quartet VI  :28
17. Quartet VII  2:29
18. Quartet VIII  :45
19. Quartet IX  3:04

Roy Malan, violin; Kevin Rogers, violin; Ivo Bokulic, viola; Vanessa Ruotolo, cello


David Tanenbaum, guitar

*Two Miniatures* (2012)  3:14
21. I  1:38
22. II  1:31

Paul Miller, clarinet; Carl Pantle, piano


Leta Miller, flute; Paul Nauert, piano

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