

Larry Polansky's musical world is so varied that it is difficult to capture and frame in its entirety. Its extent can be primarily defined by his generosity and insatiable intellectual curiosity. Despite being a polyglot and a polymath, he is a humble, quiet person who revels in the simple pleasures of writing rounds, playing folk songs, and doing crossword puzzles.

Polansky was born on October 16, 1954 and grew up in New York. After high school, he left to live and travel through South America, and upon returning, frequently moved. Where he went was often guided by who he wanted to be with and learn from, people such as Herbert Brün, Ben Johnston, David Rosenboom, and James Tenney. Polansky's immediate contemporaries also contributed to his musical upbringing, further instilling in him a deep sense of musical community and the responsibility of preserving one's own musical ecosystem. He and contemporaries with whom he has forged lifelong musical relationships—including Michael Byron, Nick Didkovsky, David Dunn, Peter Garland, David Mahler and Lois V Vierk—while still relatively lesser-known compared to some others of their generation, now comprise one of the most important groups of composers in the American Experimental Tradition.

Polansky's generosity is perhaps best exemplified by his selfless championing of the work of others as a performer, researcher, and educator. His early musical ambitions were as a guitarist, and performing continues to be an integral part of his musical ethos. Hand him pretty much any plucked string instrument, and you will quickly get a sense of his innate musicianship and encyclopedic knowledge of American folk music. He has performed with luminaries such as John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Christian Wolff, yet, when given the opportunity, does not hesitate to play with younger, lesser-known composers and performers whom he finds interesting.

Polansky often claims that he is merely an “amateur” musicologist, but this is a far too modest designation. He has been active in making available, if not altogether saving from obscurity in some cases, the works of Johanna Beyer, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and James Tenney, among others. As he has preserved and extended the legacy of his influences, mentors, and contemporaries, it will likely be his students who will eventually do the same for him. For most of his adult life, Polansky has been a dedicated educator. His teaching methodologies are as radical as his music: lectures on tuning theory are complemented by American Sign Language poetry performances; guests from various domains—artists, mathematicians, evolutionary biologists—are invited to speak alongside each other; and he is the kind of teacher who is able to help students achieve their intentions without purveying his own aesthetic.

This album exemplifies the depth to which Polansky explores and connects different musical ideas: In *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* and *Old Paint*, mathematical models and algorithmic processes are used to set folk songs; in *k-toods*, simple text scores outline complex musical processes that Polansky has theorized extensively; and the *Dismissions* are culminations of lifelong musicological investigations. His unique compositional style is unified through diversity and a constant reexamining, questioning, reformulating, and mixing of ideas. As is demonstrated by both his life and the pieces on this album, Polansky's intellectual interests and boon companions are many.

***Three Pieces for Two Pianos* (2006–07)**

Three Pieces for Two Pianos stands shoulder-to-shoulder with great American piano works of the past. Written originally for Joseph Kubera and Sarah Cahill, as commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University, it was premiered by Kubera and Marilyn Nonken in March 2011 at Roulette, New York City. It is the second of Polansky's

large-scale piano works, composed after *Lonesome Road* (1988–1989) and before *במזבז* (*B'midbar*) (2008). In the *Three Pieces*, Polansky integrates several compositional processes, many of which are individually employed in the subsequent pieces on this album. What the title does not reveal is that a subset of accompanying “interloods” may be interleaved in any order through the primary pieces. Polansky’s use of the word “interloods” relates to his notion of “toods,” a quirky, playfully critical Americanization of the European word “études.” This recording includes only one of the interloods, which is placed after the second piece.

Though the first of the *Three Pieces* is the only one of the set written without the aid of a computer, it still has the feel of some of Polansky’s algorithmically generated compositions. An underlying process of increasing rhythmic complexity articulates the form at its highest hierarchical level. After the opening and before a final coda, the sections introduce polyrhythms of higher order: 2 against 3, 3 against 5 (maintained for two sections), and then 3 against 5 against 7. The polyrhythms often consist of “interrupted” tuplets where only a fraction of the tuplet value, e.g. a third of a quartet-note triplet, is immediately followed by some other division of the beat or measure. Few composers have explored this idea to such an extent, as it requires an incredible level of virtuosity for players to execute.

The piece starts with a slow oscillation between a major and minor dyad; a theme that continues throughout in subtler ways after getting obfuscated by the increased activity of the other voices.

The image shows a musical score for Piano 2. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The score features several complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and quintuplets. A dynamic marking of *mp-mf* is present. At the end of the piece, there is a note: "each voice waits here, repeating to sync up before moving on".

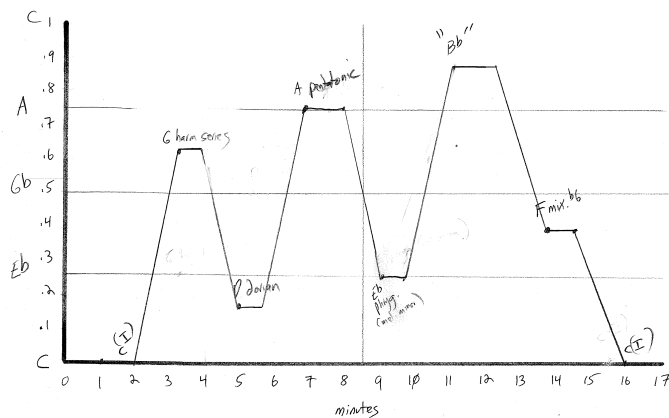
The following section consists of a series of asynchronously repeated musical cells on a fixed gamut of pitches limited to the key of B-flat. Then, a series of modulations by interpolation leads into the final section before the coda, which slowly builds up an approximation of the A harmonic series. The coda then compresses and recapitulates the prior sections, elegantly summarizing the entirety of the piece.

Both the second piece and the following interlood set the Stephen Foster song “Comrades, Fill No Glass for Me.” The interlood, composed first and then used as material for the second piece, is initially a rather straightforward setting of the song until Polansky dissolves the tune and the chordal accompaniment by introducing foreign notes, leaving cadences unresolved, and temporally diffusing some of the chords. The lyrics of the song are terribly sad, yet Polansky manages to make the piece even more melancholy despite the absence of the actual lyrics. As if the dissolution in the interlood was not enough, in Piece II, Polansky further tears the material apart and blurs the harmonies by means of a time-stretching algorithm first implemented in one of the last pieces on this album, *Dismission* (*pianotood*).

Piece III is a work of epic proportions. It is as much a feat of computer programming as it is in all other facets of its composition. The most immediate formal aspect of the piece is a series of transitions through various modes. Though not obvious on the surface, the piece is actually a canon in which each voice is played by one of the four hands. However, the canon is not articulated by pitch as with more traditional canonic forms; rather, it is a multidimensional (or multiparametric) canon where the offset in time is applied to the morphological profiles of musical parameters such as temporal density, harmonic density, and loudness. It is a brilliant

mixing of new and old compositional forms and techniques. The particular method of shaping a piece by controlling parametric profiles stems from the ideas of James Tenney. Tenney also used parametric profiles to independently control multiple voices of a polyphonic texture in his *Changes, 64 studies for 6 harps* (1985), but it is unclear if he ever used it canonically (though perhaps not coincidentally, *Changes* is also an exploration of modal traversal).

Another method borrowed from Tenney is the implementation of a half-cosine interpolation to smoothly transition out of one parametric state into another. Polansky's work is replete with various methods of interpolation, especially between different groups of pitches. Early examples include *Psaltery* (1978-79) and *Horn* (1989, rev. 1992), but the usage here is a testament to the degree to which Polansky has developed the idea.

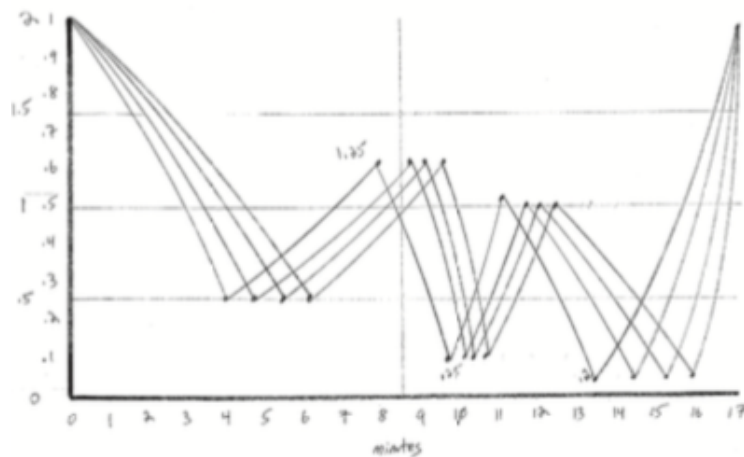


3 Pieces for two Pianos
Movement 3

Modes

- 1) I (C) C E^b E F G A B
- 2) G chain series G A B C# D...
- 3) Dorian D E F G A B C
- 4) A prot A B C# E F#
- 5) Eb mix (ant. mode) Eb F G A B C D
- 6) Bb Bb F C
- 7) F mix^{b6} F G A B C D^b Eb
- 8) I (C) C E^b E F G A B

Polansky
1987



4 Pieces for two Pianos
Movement 3
near 20 minutes

Polansky
1987

***Old Paint* (2010)**

In this setting of the traditional American cowboy song “I Ride an Old Paint,” Polansky augments Ruth Crawford Seeger’s piano arrangement from *Twenty-two American Folk Tunes Arranged for Piano*. While maintaining Seeger’s simple chordal accompaniment—just open perfect fifths of a repeated I-V progression—he allows the performer some degree of freedom: “piano, LH: fifths, or single notes, in any octave. Freely, not necessarily on downbeats.” The piece starts and ends with a haunting melody that floats above, below, and around the tune sung by the pianist. This melodic accompaniment was generated by extending a probabilistic algorithm originally conceived by Tenney to model the melodic style of what Polansky sometimes calls the “American Atonal School” (Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, Carl Ruggles, and Henry Cowell, more commonly referred to as “Ultramodernists”). Polansky has coined the process “the Dissonant Counterpoint Algorithm” (DCA) in the spirit of Charles Seeger’s *Manual of Dissonant Counterpoint*. The algorithm’s concise definition evidences its elegance: The longer something has not been chosen (in the case of *Old Paint*, a pitch), the more likely it will be chosen. Polansky extends Tenney’s original idea by adding a “gravity” around selected pitches, which reduces the probability that nearby pitches will occur on the following selection. In portions of the piece, some of the notes of the melody can be played with or replaced by percussive sounds chosen by the performer. Parametric profiles that control the variables of the algorithm—such as the pitch range, the width of the gravitational field, and the probability that a rest or a percussive sound can occur—shape the melody throughout the piece and within each verse and chorus. Polansky’s overlay of a melody generated by the DCA is a respectful nod to Tenney that musically reconciles Seeger’s deep interests in both American folk music and Dissonant Counterpoint. Polansky wrote *Old Paint* as a resident at The MacDowell Colony in 2010.

***k-toods* (2002)**

The 5 *k-toods* musically reflect personal experiences and musings Polansky has had as a father. While loosely programmatic in that sense, they are not at all separate from deep musical investigations found throughout his work; most notably, mathematical functions of time that control the evolution of one musical shape into another, which he calls “morphological mutations.” In *k-toods*, the performers illustrate the overarching metaphor—one can influence a child’s growth but exactly how they develop is unpredictable—by functioning as more complex versions of Polansky’s mutation algorithms such as those implemented with computers in *51 Melodies* (1991) and *The Casten Variation* (1993-94).

The first two *toods*, *growth spurt* and *tween*, are the most straightforward. In the former, the evolution is guided by an additive process, while in the latter, the performers gradually morph from one two-measure set to another by replacement. The title of *k-tood #3, not in this house. . .*, is often said by a basketball player after blocking an opponent’s shot. Even though Polansky was an avid basketball player for much of his life, extending an interpretation of the title into fatherhood—negotiating rules and regulations with your child—would not be a far stretch. The parts are distinguished by different key signatures and are further delineated by alternating accents and melodic figurations. Like the first *k-tood*, each measure is repeated several times until one of the players moves on. Starting from the fourth measure, the players are instructed to improvise but remain within their respective key. The density of the piece generally increases throughout, but towards the end, there is a relatively quiet chord aggregated between the two players. However, the lull is short-lived and the penultimate two measures are as frenzied as the material before the lull until the final, somewhat somber, chord.

The scores of the final two *'toods* are the most open, consisting strictly of texts outlining how to perform the pieces. *k-tood #4, baby pictures*, is perhaps the most challenging to play. While there are several versions ranging in difficulty from “easy” to “crazily advanced,” they all require extraordinary musicianship with respect to listening skills. In the version on this recording, each player initially picks one note to improvise upon. They must then successively add notes until they are improvising on complementary (non-overlapping) sets. This means the players must keep track of which notes have been played in order to determine which notes are still available. In the case that a player mistakenly picks a note that has already sounded, both are supposed to stop, say “Darn!” (though this recording is more explicit), and start over. This occurs several times throughout the recording, including the very beginning, when the players start almost simultaneously an octave apart. *k-tood #5, one thing at a time*, is essentially a game of follow the leader. The piece starts with one hand playing an improvised musical idea. Then the three remaining hands successively enter varying one of the musical parameters while keeping the others the same. The process is repeated several times with a new leader and a new order of followers each time. The title not only aptly and succinctly describes the musical process, but is also a friendly reminder to both fathers and non-fathers alike to take things one at a time.

Dismission (pianotood) (2006) and Dismission (pianotood 2) (2006)

For many years, Polansky regularly sang with the Enfield Shaker Singers, a New Hampshire group dedicated to the study and performance of Shaker music. Through the Shakers, he first became interested in the concept of “dismission” in American sacred music. In 2005, he set the Shaker hymn “Dismission of Great I” in his guitar work *songs and toods*. In the context of the Shaker hymn, dismissal refers to the dismissal of the ego. Another usage of dismissal in American sacred music, and Christianity in general, is the dismissal from prayer at the end of a service such as with the Lutheran hymn “Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing.”

In 2006, musicologist Amy Beal found a little-known shape-note hymn called “Dismission” in a hymnal held in the Firestone Library Special Collections at Princeton University, which she copied and sent to Polansky for his birthday. This version differs from both another shape-note hymn of the same name in the *Missouri Harmony* and the Lutheran hymn mentioned above. The Lutheran hymn does, however, seem to share a similar provenance as the one that Beal found: originally a Sicilian boat song that became a German Christmas carol before entering into the English hymnal repertoire. For Beal’s birthday that same year, Polansky set the hymn in *Dismission (pianotood)*, *Dismission (pianotood 2)*, and one more variation not included on this recording. He set the piece again several years later in the guitar quartet/quintet *Ontslaan (toontood)* (2009).

Dismission (pianotood) expands the original hymn both harmonically, with very wide, open voicings of the chords through much of the piece, and temporally, by increasing then decreasing the lengths of the measures with the time-stretching algorithm also used in the *Three Pieces for Two Pianos*. The continual harmonic resolution and smooth voice-leading that would result from narrower voicings is obscured: Instead of a note resolving down to its nearest neighbor, for example, Polansky stratifies the suspended note from the resolving note in the following chord. While a sense of harmonic movement remains, the resulting ambiguities are accentuated by the temporal prolongation. Polansky has used variants of his time-stretching algorithm in more recent pieces such as *Ontslaan (toontood)* and a setting of “Gentle Annie” for voice and piano in *Three Songs for Tom and Joe* (2014). The algorithm has roots in earlier experiments that Polansky

conducted with Tom Erbe to variably stretch digital audio recordings in a series of pieces called *Time Studies (1–7)* (Tyler “Speedboy” Kingdom) (1994), however, *Dismission (pianotood)* is the first time he applied the idea to measure lengths.

dismission
pianotood

polansky

Slowly, quietly, space = time, each measure in 4/4

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *f*, and an articulation marking *acc.*. The second system features *p* and *f* markings. The third system includes *p* and *f* markings. The fourth system concludes with *p* and *f* markings and a fermata over the final chord.

Dismission (pianotood 2) does not implement the time-stretching algorithm and the voicings are generally a bit more compact. Instead Polansky ornaments some of the chords with delicate embellishments and figurations. Like a sort of respectful musical graffiti, he adds a touch of personal style while preserving the original. It is a delightful end to this ambitious album and a perfect reflection of Polansky’s nature: quiet and sensitive; reverent to the works, people, and ideas that precede and influence him; but always keen to understand how those ideas can be developed, using music and the compositional process as his laboratory.

—Michael Winter

Michael Winter is a composer currently living in Los Angeles, where he co-founded and co-directs the wulf.

A special thanks to Amy Beal and Laura Steenberge for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Larry Polansky (b. 1954) is a composer, theorist, teacher, writer, performer, programmer, editor, and publisher. He lives in Santa Cruz, California, teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is also the Emeritus Strauss Professor of Music at Dartmouth College, and co-director and co-founder of Frog Peak Music.
www.larrypolansky.com

Pianist and musicologist **Amy C. Beal** is Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research specializes in American and contemporary music, and 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 has contributed numerous liner notes for New World Records publications, and serves on the Board of Trustees.

Tobin Chodos is a composer, pianist and musicologist. He holds a degree in Classics from Columbia University and is pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego. He was a 2004 Dave Brubeck Fellow and in 2014 was named a fellow of the Asian Cultural Council, who supported his travel to China to research the growing improvised music scenes of Shanghai and Beijing. He has performed around the world as a jazz pianist, and his compositions have been performed by many noted contemporary music ensembles in the United States.

As a classical pianist, **Rory Cowal's** repertoire spans the breadth of the American avant-garde. In addition to classic works by composers such as John Cage and Johanna Beyer, he has performed numerous premieres, including pieces by Larry Polansky and Muhal Richard Abrams. As a jazz pianist, he has performed in festivals and concert series across North America such as the Angel City Jazz Festival, Harlem in the Himalayas, and Jazz at LACMA. He is a member of Slumgum, an award-winning jazz quartet.

Pianist **Joseph Kubera** has been a leading interpreter of contemporary music for the past three decades. He has been soloist at such festivals as the Warsaw Autumn, Berlin *Inventionen*, and Prague Spring, and has worked closely with such legendary composers as John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley. Composers who have written works for him include Larry Austin, Michael Byron, Anthony Coleman, Elliott Sharp, Alvin Lucier, Roscoe Mitchell, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny. He toured widely with the Cunningham Dance Company, and he has made definitive recordings of Cage's *Music of Changes* and *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. Mr. Kubera is a core member of S.E.M. Ensemble, and he has performed with a wide range of New York ensembles and orchestras. Mr. Kubera has recorded for the Wergo, Albany, New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, O.O. Discs, Mutable Music, Cold Blue, and Opus One labels.
www.josephkubera.com

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 spectrale* (Dufourt, Fineberg, Murail, Vivier). She champions young Americans Drew Baker, Lou Bunk, Richard Carrick, Christopher Trapani, and Nina C. Young, and collaborates as 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 University Press), *Voix Voilées: Spectral Music for Piano* (Metier) and *Subject* (Tzadik). She records 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.

Pianist and composer **Ittai Rosenbaum** has performed jazz, contemporary concert music, and popular music in Europe, Israel, and in the United States. He has released several albums under his name and collaborated with poet Liat Kaplan on his 2009 CD *Between Waters and Waters*. He has taught at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, Tel Aviv University, and at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In his doctoral dissertation composition (UCSC, 2014) he investigated intentional incorporation of physical movement, space, and reference to audience in music performance.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

10 String (9 Events). Included on *Gertrudes: Music for Violin and Resonator Guitar* by Robert Ashley, Lainie Fefferman, Paula Matthusen, James Moore, Larry Polansky, and Ken Thomson. New World Records 80771-2.

Change. Artifact Recordings ART 122.

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Lonesome Road. Martin Christ, piano. New World Records 80566-2.

Movement in E Major for John Cage. Miwako Abe, violin; Michael Kieran Harvey, piano. New World Records 80641-2.

Piker. Margaret Lancaster, solo piccolo. Included on *Io: Flute Music* by Johanna Beyer, Joan La Barbara, Larry Polansky, James Tenney, and Lois V Vierk. New World Records 80665-2.

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The Theory of Impossible Melody. New World Records 80684-2.

The World's Longest Melody. Zwerm. New World Records 80700-2.

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Three Pieces for Two Pianos

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Recorded on June 2, 2015 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC.

Pianos by Steinway & Sons

Old Paint engineered by Barry Phillips.

Recorded on August 26, 2015.

Dismission (pianotood) and *Dismission (pianotood 2)* engineered by William Coulter.

Recorded on May 21, 2015.

k-toods engineered by Sean Hayward.

Recorded on June 4, 2012.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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LARRY POLANSKY (b. 1954)
THREE PIECES FOR TWO PIANOS

80777-2

Three Pieces for Two Pianos (2006–07) 33:41

1. I 8:00

2. II 6:20

3. II (interlud) 2:08

4. III 17:00

Joseph Kubera, Marilyn Nonken, pianos

5. *Old Paint* (2010) 3:25

Rory Cowal, piano

k-toods (2002) 14:35

6. growth spurt 2:21

7. tween 1:11

8. not in this house 3:14

9. baby pictures 4:42

10. one thing at a time 2:46

Tobin Chodos, Ittai Rosenbaum, pianos

11. *Dismission (pianotood)* (2006) 3:15

12. *Dismission (pianotood 2)* (2006) 4:30

Amy Beal, piano

TT: 60:01

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