I. OPENING SPEECH

Good morning everyone and welcome to the 2006 Mannes Institute. This event has become successful enough to go on the road, and I’m pleased that Yale has provided us with a new haven. Samuel Johnson once told Boswell, “if you’re tired of London, you’re tired of life.” Well, I’m not tired of New York, I’m sometimes tired of life, but I’m happy to be here. Since this is the first Institute for many of you, you probably don’t know what to expect. Actually, I’m not sure either. If you ask me what’s in store, I’d refer you to don Quixote. Quixote tells Sancho Panza about Orbaneja, el pintor de Úbeda, the painter of Úbeda. When asked what he was painting, Orbaneja replied lo que saliere—whatever comes out.

Over the next four days, we’ll paint a picture of chromaticism, adding one quixotic brushstroke to the next, and what we’ll create, as Orbaneja said, is lo que saliere—whatever comes out. Our goal is not to brush up chromaticism and make it tidy, but to decompose it and get under its skin. Let’s give chase and hound down its foxes through debate and the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives. Our bugle call is Diderot’s admonition, “that which is not questioned, remains unproved.”

I must confess that coming to New Haven, or back for some of us, posed a problem for the name of this year’s event. To be institutionally correct, I had to work in the names of both schools. I ended up going with Mannes Institute at Yale, but tweaked it a bit by using the @ sign like an email address. That made it a little more fun, a word not often associated with academia. The encircled “at” beat out the more obvious Mannes-Yale Institute, simply because I couldn’t deal with the hyphen.

Chronic hyphenation is symptomatic of our time. The eighteenth century, I’m told, had a rhetorical prejudice against the hyphen, which it considered undignified and lower class. Dr. Johnson hyphenates hood-wink and mocking-stock, but not a whole lot else. Now though, these “uncouth noun clumps”—that’s Nicholson Baker’s term—are sprouting up everywhere, shoving two words into one. Like Marx’s idea of capitalism, or one view of the leading tone, the hyphen culminates in its own demise by eventually producing a single unhyphenated compound. Backseat, for instance, started life as two words like rows in a car, evolved to hyphenation, and then fused into a single word. Ditto for secondhand. Baker thinks our decision to hyphenate or not should reflect the meaning of the word itself. For the sake of metaphorical accuracy, he says the normally conjoined pantyhose warrants a “tasty spandex hyphen.” On the other hand, he praises the semantic symbolism in Joyce’s unhyphenated shrinkage of, dare I say, scrotumtightening.

Even though I went with the “at” sign, the spirit of this Institute is clearly hyphenated. As if Rick Cohn’s defection from the Second City wasn’t enough, this year’s collaboration creates the heady specter of what Taylor Greer called a new Mannes-Yalensis axis of music theory. There’s also something appropriately chromatic about the hyphen. It basically passes between two discretely diatonic words and blurs them together in a more parsimonious and melismatic way. The hyphen is an intervallic gap filler, a punctuational passing tone connecting things that are normatively kept apart.

What I’m most amazed at though is the extent to which the hyphen has saturated our human
foreground as well. As it turns out, we’ve got a lot of bifurcated people here sporting double-barrel names of their own, like Anson-Cartwright, Bribitzer-Stull, and Schuster-Craig. There’s also the unhypenated but invariably linked Carson Berry and, most curiously, the unspaced conjunction with intriguing internal capitalization of BaileyShea.

This hyper-hyphenation (which itself is hyphenated) made me think about the other people here, and I discovered some fairly remarkable things. First of all, there are a lot of names that describe concrete, tangible objects. We’ve got some Rings, a Callender, some Sherry, and a Forte. We’re also fortunate to have a number of professions on hand. There’s a Cook, a Kopp, a Taylor, and even a Proctor. For those who like to fish, we have a Hook—and a Bass. Then there’s a whole group of names I have trouble pronouncing correctly, like Tymoczko, Gjerdingen, Hoeckner, and Taavola. There’re people whose names sound like the Jewish law firm I toiled at in Manhattan before I discovered the promised land of music theory: Friedmann, Kramer, Rifkin, and Stein. Not to be outdone, we have their white-shoe counterpart: Harrison, Christensen, and McCreless.

We have two names than make all this very confusing, both Wayne. Then there’s someone with the same name as a guy who’s managed to come to every single Institute except this one without ever applying: Joel. The name of one person who couldn’t make it this year describes what I suspect some of you wish I’d do with these self-indulgent orations: Burnham. That’s why he’s not here. The good news is I only have two talks this year rather than four. The bad news is they’re longer, and not as funny.

We have two Smiths on hand, distinguished by their lone vowel in order to keep up with our Jones. Then there’s a mysterious red planet affiliation, with the Marvin, Martin, Martins constellation. We have a Walter, and a just plain Walt. I’m sorry we don’t have Mr. Rogers, but we do have Miss Rogers. We have names that sound like old cars, like a DeVoto, and the past tense of the word “strike”—Strunk. We also have a crisp first name with only four letters yet two syllables, Alex, which is symmetrically offset by a four-letter two-syllable last name, Puri. One name is only a suffix, Ian. For the kids, we’ve got some wacky cartoon characters with funny rhyming names: Jeff n’ Neff. Finally, I’m analytically pleased to announce for the first time in the history of the Institute, the last syllable of a first name rhymes with the first syllable of the last name, forming an etymological Retrograde Inversion Chain. Can you guess? Kevin Swinden.

Well, enough name game. You didn’t come all this way to do this. So let me just come right out and say it: music theory is still under the spell of Tristan, or maybe Parsifal. We’ve come to New Haven in search of some Holy Grail to explain irregular chord progressions and nondiatonic relationships. Chromaticism is a crusade, and we are its knights. The Institute is a musical pilgrimage. And what better a Holy Land than Mother Yale? Now anybody who even owns Grout knows that chromaticism is just about as old as Jerusalem. We may think about it differently from time to time, but it’s really nothing new. Chromaticism in fact is as venerable as diatonicism, or just about so. It’s not only always been a melodic option at least, but at the beginning, it wasn’t even the most radical one. It would be presumptuous in this cerebral air to opine at length about the Greek genera, but I’d like to muse about them just a little, especially the chromatic, and hopefully sprinkle a few factoids along the way. Caveat eruditus: please excuse whatever unscholarly oversights, distortions, and exaggerations I no doubt am about to make. I will accept corrections and criticisms by email.

So why conjure up those old Greeks again? “Athens, the eye of Greece, mother of arts,” exclaimed Milton! And Virginia Wolff, who I trust in just about everything except my emotional stability, says we look to Athens because “the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. It is to the Greeks we turn,” she recommended before drowning herself, “when we are sick of the vagueness and the confusion of our own age.” Evidently it didn’t help Ginny too much in the long run, but proceed we shall nonetheless.
The Greeks of course considered the perfect fourth rather than the octave a conceptual module, a fixed frame inside of which they placed two movable notes to form different tetrachords. I’m not exactly sure why they bothered with this, but Andy Mead, who seems smarter than me, once said it’s because the fourth is so natural and easy to sing. The octave then, which seems to me even more natural, was just a conjunction or “fitting together” of two tetrachords. Nichomachus suggests a more pragmatic explanation, citing Philolaus, a contemporary of Socrates and the earliest Pythagorean, who points to a musician playing a lyre. A pluck of the strings was known as a grab, and the first grab was a fourth. So the origin of the tetrachord might have something to do with the mere shape of the hand.

After they figured out the fourth and fit two of them together to make an octave, they called the gap between them a tone, which is also the difference between a fourth and its inversion of the fiveth. Starting from one end of the tetrachord, it became clear that if you stacked three tones in a row, you exceeded the frame of a fourth. What actually fit was two wholes and a half. The Greeks called this halftone a leimma—hope I’m pronouncing it right for you sticklers—meaning the remainder after inserting two whole tones into the fourth. It was the residue, whatever was left over, a sort of freak of musical nature or teras in Greek, inexpressible by rational means, with that bizarre ratio of 256:243 computed by Plato in the Timaeus. Ptolemy says it’s perfectly reasonable that there are two 1/2 tones here, because that’s also the basic structure of the body, that is, the lower portion is one unit, the upper torso another, and the head a half. Same thing with the arm: upper arm one, lower arm two, hand a half.

So if bisecting the tone made a semitone, then dicing the semitone made a quartertone, or what the Greeks call a diesis. They decided, correctly I think, that this was the smallest interval the average Joe could realistically sing or hear. Ptolemy notes that the human capacity both to generate and perceive an interval converges here at the same limit. He even draws a link between the word diesis, the quartertone, and dialysis, meaning “vanishing point” or cessation, in the sense that this was the vanishing point of sound itself. There’s also a connection between the word “tone” or tonos, and diateinein, which means to stretch, as well as tasis, meaning tension. The whole tone stretches the space between two notes creating a tension, whereas the quartertone contracts it. Aristides says the voice itself is actually stretched by the diatonic genus.

The word “chromatic,” of course, comes from chroma, meaning color, or chroa, meaning surface or plane, which I’ll get to in a minute. Some say the chromatic genus was a coloration or inflection of the diatonic, which is the sense we traditionally use the word today, i.e., with a diatonic bias. But Aristides says that which lies between black and white is color, so the genus lying between the enharmonic and diatonic is called color or chromatic. In other words, and here’s my point, the chromatic is not really opposed, let alone subordinate to the diatonic in the binary relationship we tend to think of today, but is rather a judicious midpoint, a median between the twin poles of the diatonic and the enharmonic, the last of which fell by the wayside, and we’ve pretty much forgotten about ever since.

Autobiographical footnote: I personally have trouble interpreting the word chromatic as color, I think because I grew up in Detroit in the fifties. Detroit is Motor City, and if the word chrome doesn’t mean much to you, it meant a whole lot to me. Detroit in the fifties was all about chrome, shiny metal bumpers and trim. Motown was Chrometown—Chrome City, or maybe Chromatic City. The undisputed Queen of Chrome was the 1953 Buick Roadmaster. She had the biggest and most impressive chromatic grille you ever saw, like twelve fangs under the lips of Angelina Jolie. Chromatic to me means steely silver. It reflects color, but has none of its own. In fact, chrome was the only part of the car that didn’t have color. Bumpers were big mirrors. We stared into those chromatic grilles and giggled at our distorted faces, and then went inside to watch Leave It To Beaver.

Aristides and Aristoxenus offer different explanations why the enharmonic disappeared. One says people had trouble singing successive quartertones, the other says no one felt that the large upper ditone, equivalent to our major threerd, was melodic. I think they’re both right: quartertones are too small, and a
major third is too big. As you know, the lower dense cluster of notes in the chromatic and enharmonic tetrachords was called the \textit{pyknon}—which Barsky, the Russian, makes a big fuss about—while the upper, airy portion was the \textit{apyknon}. Small intervals are dense or \textit{pykna}, larger ones are diffuse or \textit{araia}. Even though the chromatic had only two \textit{consecutive} semitones, the Greeks conceived of it as consisting entirely of halfsteps. The highest interval contained three semitones, so in theory there were five altogether. The uniformity of the chromatic series thus reveals a perfection in its internal regularity, and more specifically in its tripling of the semitone in the \textit{apyknon} of the tetrachord.

This notion that the number three represents perfection predates the Christian era. The Greeks didn’t mean in a trinitarian sense, but rather that three is the first number to display a beginning, middle, and end, expressing the resolution of a dialectic opposition. Ptolemy says the chromatic genus is the most agreeable to the ear because it represents the perfect mean between the enharmonic and the diatonic. The Greeks drew numerous analogies between these three genera and other trichotomies. Aristides, for example, says the diatonic represents our body, the enharmonic our soul, and the chromatic whatever lies between. In the universe, the diatonic signifies inert matter, the enharmonic the first cause, and the chromatic the life force passing from one to the other. In terms of geometry, he says diatonicism, whose whole tone is thick and substantial, is like a solid; the enharmonic, whose quartetone has a barely discernable magnitude or thickness, represents the line. Chromaticism, whose semitone is intermediate between the two, is organized as a plane. He supports this argument etymologically, since the word for a plane or surface is \textit{chroa}, which literally means color. A plane or surface, like the shiny chrome on the ‘53 Buick, displays the color of whatever is reflected.

The metaphor I like best though is Ptolemy’s, which is more imaginative, albeit based on a familiar Aristotelian scheme. We know from Boethius that Aristotle says everything, including music, has two aspects: the theoretical and the practical. And each of these two divisions has three genera. The theoretical is divided into the natural, the mathematical, and the spiritual. The practical is divided into the ethical, the domestic, and the political. These categories lie on a continuum, differing only in terms of magnitude or degree. Ptolemy applies Aristotle’s taxonomy to music. On the theoretical side, the enharmonic represents the natural, while the diatonic represents the spiritual. Chromaticism represents the mathematical, halfway between the two and partaking of both. In the realm of practice, the enharmonic represents the ethical, which is private and individual, whereas the diatonic represents the political, which is public and social. The enharmonic is soft and relaxed, and partakes of the inner aura of virtue. The diatonic is heavy and rigid, expressing the outer order of politics.

For Ptolemy, the practical significance of chromaticism is its reconciliation of extremes. Just as mathematics mediates between nature and spirit in the domain of theory, on a pragmatic level, the domesticity of family life, or what Aristotle calls the “art of household management,” forms a chromatic bridge or musical hyphen between the public and the private. Diatonicism represents the objectivity of society, while enharmonicism represents the subjectivity of self. One invokes the constraint of normative order and tonal law, the other the melisma of contemplation and personal introspection. The family is the chromatic equivalent between diatonic society and the enharmonic individual. Just as chromaticism mediates between enharmonic freedom and diatonic order in music, our family, says Ptolemy, mediates between our private and public life. We cluster together in the chromatic \textit{pyknon} of the home, not so close to each other as to merge identities and become indistinct like enharmonic quartetones, but not so far apart like autonomous citizens separated by whole tones in the diatony of public life. We nestle together, a family of semitones, in that remarkably ratio of 256:243.

The twelve tones of the chromatic gamut are members of a musical family—equal, close, complexly interacting, but always individually distinct. Together they comprise a tonal household, akin to what Epimenides, the holy man of Crete in the seventh century before Christ, called “soulmates of the manger.” We are gathered here today on a pilgrimage to Yale to study the family life of these chromatic siblings, these twelve disciples, as soulmates of a musical manger. Yet at times, we’ll find them behaving
less with domestic harmony, and more like the family Samuel Johnson describes akin to “a little kingdom, torn with factions and exposed to revolutions.” But as far as real families go, I prefer the more mundane description attributed to Charondas of Catana, the legendary lawgiver of Rhegium, who called those packed most closely around us, who we’ve temporarily left at home, our “companions of the cupboard.” And over the next four days, as the hyphens between us begin to contract and we ourselves become more chromatic, we will surely become that too.

II. CONCERT SPEECH

Welcome to our featured musical program. Our performer is an Israeli pianist, Dror Baitel. He was born in Tel-Aviv in 1986, and studied with several outstanding teachers in Israel. He is currently a student of Vladimir Feltsman and Yuri Kim at the Mannes College in New York, where he won the prestigious Goldsmith Award. His music has been broadcast over Israeli radio, and he has performed at Alice Tully Hall and the United Nations. By sheer luck, I happened to hear Dror practicing some Bach one day at Mannes and was thoroughly captivated. He has an abundance of both talent and taste. We’re honored that he’s polished up some difficult chromatic pieces, learned a new one at our request, and enthusiastically trained up to New Haven to play a private recital for our distinguished gathering. Please join me in welcoming this wonderful musician to Yale and the Mannes Institute, Dror Baitel.

III. ESSAY SPEECH

This year the Institute’s inaugurating a new musical essay award. Each year we plan to give a prize for an essay on the overall topic of the Institute. The winner receives a bundle of cash, and presents the essay as a talk. We plan to eventually publish a journal called The Musical Essayist. Anyone, including graduate students, is eligible to apply. This year we received six submissions, five from established scholars, and one from a student. What we didn’t anticipate was that it would come from an undergraduate. All the submissions were excellent, but one more closely met our distinctive criteria. According to the guidelines, “the style is creative nonfiction with an emphasis on imagination, charm, sophistication, and the belletristic quality of the prose itself. This award is not for a scholarly article or a paper at a conference. The writing may be humorous, philosophical, critical, or personal, and should engage others in a compelling, entertaining, and thoughtful manner.” So what are we looking for?

Johnson’s Dictionary defines essay as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regularly and ordered composition.” William Gass paints a clearer picture of what essaying is all about. The hero of the essay, he says—and I’m quoting liberally—is the author in the act of thinking things out. Halfway between sermon and story, the essay interests itself in the narrative of ideas in their unfolding. It browses, thumbs through things, proposing possibilities, reciting opinions, passing from one thought to another like food at a picnic. The essay—I’m still quoting Gass—is the opposite of that awful object, the article. The article pretends everything is clear, its argument unassailable, without soggy patches, illicit inferences, or illegitimate connections. It comes with scholarly guarantees and a seal of approval. Given in a dull dry voice at a conference, it still sounds like writing, born for immediate burial in a journal.

Now I don’t want to belabor this or steal time from our winner, let alone our special guest, but since you’re all very good writers who I’m encouraging to apply, I’d like to quote one of the greatest essayists to describe what this is all about. The essay is “suggestive rather than comprehensive. Hints, glimpses, and germs are the utmost it pretends to, and leaves it others to run them down. It’s not written as if always under oath, but must be understood with some abatement. It imparts its discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development. The essay, in short, walks about, not to and from.” An article, on the other hand, “never hints or suggests anything, but unladens its cargo in perfect order. The author never stoops to catch a glittering something in your presence, and share it before he quite knows whether it be true or not. Surmises, misgivings, and embryo conceptions have no place in its vocabulary. You can’t hover on the borderland of truth, or wander in the maze of a probably argument. The twilight of dubiety
never falls upon it. It’s orthodox—it has no doubts.”

The writer is Charles Lamb, perhaps the greatest essayist since Montaigne. But enough said—I hope you get the picture and will pick up your pens. The 2006 Mannes Institute Essay Award goes to Jeffrey Levenberg, a graduating senior at the New England Conservatory of Music, for his essay *Sophistry Used Against Transcendental Chromaticism in the Ears of the Discourteous*. Jeff has come all the way from Florida to present his talk. He’s obviously an enterprising and clever guy, and his essay deserves ample recognition for capturing the unique literary and intellectual ideals this award represents. I’ve given him some money, and when he’s done, I’ll hand him a certificate. I think it’s remarkable and quite special that a bright student is the first to win this distinctive award. Please join me in a round of applause for Jeff Levenberg.

IV. BANQUET SPEECH

The beauty of this Institute for me, unlike other aspects of my life, is that I’m allowed to make decisions. They may not be right, but at least I’m empowered to make them. Everything else in my world, and I suspect yours, is run by that bureaucratic hydra, the committee. This past year I had a harrowing experience with one of these creatures, and came away agreeing with a seventeenth-century assessment by a Frenchman whose name I can’t remember. When a committee is made up of five people, he said, one of them is reading, one is delivering their opinion, two are gossiping with each other, and one is asleep. But I really didn’t accomplish all this alone. There’s been a committee all along. Pat, Dan, and I worked together on virtually every aspect of this event. I’m indebted to them, especially Pat, for helping me bring the Institute to Yale. Beyond that, our entire faculty, including Richard, David, Charles, and Deborah, worked closely as a committee for more than a year putting all the pieces together. Even beyond that though, I see the Institute itself as sort of a big committee, and all of you as its members. The word “committee” comes of course from the Latin *committere*, meaning “to commit.” A “comit-ee” is a person to whom something is committed, or to whom a commitment is made, and a “comit-or” is a person who makes a commitment.

At the Institute we’re all committed and responsible to each other for the task at hand. We can’t fulfill this alone, but only together as a group. There’s an essential element of dialogue in what we do, and in what we seek. I recently learned that this difference between monologue and dialogue is what distinguishes Shakespeare and Cervantes as rival teachers of how we learn and grow. Hamlet and Lear discover truth by talking to themselves, whereas Quixote and Sancho Panza discover truth by talking with each other. For the Englishman, we come to know things alone, through personal introspection. For the Spaniard, we come to know things together, through interpersonal discourse. One’s protagonists are great soliloquists, the other’s are great conversationalists. Friendship in Shakespeare is ironic at best, commonly treacherous. The bond between Quixote and Sancho, the prototype in modern literature, is the foundation for all else.

In this sense, we are more like Cervantes' knight with squire than Shakespeare's solitary prince or king. Here, for four days, we are men and women of La Mancha, in search of windmills, dependent upon one another. We are a compound lot, interlocking comit-ees and comit-or-s, hyphenated at the hip, quixotically seeking to find, in John Donne’s words, “what wind serves to advance an honest mind.” And if we can catch that gentle breeze, even for a moment, though others may think us mad, then we too may fulfill some impossible dream.

V. CLOSING SPEECH

When I graduated from Yale Law School back in June of 1976, I never imagined I’d be addressing a room of music theorists down the block thirty years later. I was rubbing shoulders at the time with Hillary
and Bill Clinton, as well as future Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas, Sam Alito, and Secretary of Labor Robert Reich—but I sure didn’t know it. I spent most of my time playing piano in the law school cafeteria, auditing Bob Morris’s theory class, hanging around Wendy Wasserstein, and arguing till dawn about the Mideast with my best friend, a Sudanese Arab named Salman Salman who now runs the World Bank. That’s Yale.

For those of you who’ve woefully neglected the history of America’s greatest educational institution this side of the Charles—the Avis of American academies—Yale was founded over three centuries ago back in 1701. In 1854, halfway between the birth of Yale and today, Joseph Battell donated $5,000 to Old Blue “for the support of a teacher of the science of music to such students as may avail themselves the opportunity.” Yale formally established its Department of Music in 1889—shortly before Allen Forte and Bob Morgan arrived. Its first music degrees were awarded a few years later to four students whose names I neither know nor will mention.

Interestingly enough, in 1776, two hundred years before I graduated from Yale, and at the precise midpoint between its founding and Battell’s introduction of music, Thomas Jefferson, who had absolutely nothing to do with any of these earthshaking events was chosen by his peers to compose the Declaration of Independence. Why Jefferson? Because he was unanimously considered to be the best writer. No one could express these ideas better. Music, however, was what Tom called his “favorite passion.” He practiced the violin every day, and studied the scores of Corelli and Scarlatti.

In his original draft of the Declaration, Jefferson wrote, “we hold these truths to be sacred, that all men are created equal.” This, he said, “was intended to be an expression of the American mind.” Before submitting it to the congressional convention, he shared his work with a single man: Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson was known as the best writer, but Franklin was known to be the smartest. The elder statesman made few revisions. One thing he did change, however, was crucial: the Philadelphian crossed out the word sacred and substituted self-evident. And thus was born that famous watchword of democracy, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” With a single stroke of the pen, Franklin shifted the source of authority from God to man, from transcendence to immanence, from an appeal to faith to an appeal to reason. If Richard Kramer talks about the chromatic moment in Enlightenment thought, this was the moment of Enlightenment in American thought.

That same year back in England, as we were about to embark upon a struggle for freedom, Charles Burney published what would become the most important account of eighteenth-century musical life, A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period. Burney was a celebrated figure: historian, scientist, composer, teacher, organist, and man of letters. He was also an impeccable researcher, gathering information over a period of years by traveling throughout the continent. He even wrote a book on comets.

Burney was one of the most brilliant musical scholars of his time. According to The New Grove, his book “embodies a combination of technical knowledge, historical inquiry, literary skill, and personal observation which probably no other musician of his age could offer and few since have rivaled.” Samuel Johnson said of his close friend Burney, “I much question if there is in the world such another man for mind, intelligence, and manner.” Burney lamented that the first volume of Hawkins’ competing book hit the stands shortly before his, but in the end it really didn’t much matter. He died in 1814, the day after Napoleon’s abdication.

Folks like us don’t pay much attention to old Burney these days. He belongs more to the history of musicology than of music theory. So why am I talking about him now? Well, I want to point out Burney’s credentials to underscore his views on chromaticism, which are not only fascinating, but probably hogwash to most of you. In particular, I want to focus on his assessment of a composer who I thought might play a bigger role at this Institute than he actually did—which was nothing at all. The composer
I’m talking about, of course, is the man Stravinsky called the “crank of chromaticism,” the notorious Count of Conza, Prince of Venosa, otherwise known as Don Carlo Gesualdo. Gesualdo was the O.J. Simpson of his day. One night he came home from the office to find his wife Maria, wayward daughter of the Marquis di Pescara, in flagrante delicto de fragrante peccato with one Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. I gather Don Carlo didn’t wear tight gloves and festoon them with a machete like our Heisman Trophy winner, but he just ordered them butchered.

All in all, Maria’s indiscretion and Don Carlo’s machismo played an important role in music history, and what I prefer to think of as the prehistory of this chromatic congress. There must have been some sixteenth-century Giovanni Cochrane, because don Carlo evidently got away scot-free. As a result of the public outrage, however, Gesualdo retired to a country estate and withdrew from society just like O.J. Before that, he composed on the side under a pseudonym, Giuseppe Pilonij. After the trial, which was not televised, and quite unlike O.J., Gesualdo concentrated on music rather than golf and cultivated the chromaticism for which he is forever infamous.

Professor Burney goes to great lengths to condemn Gesualdo as a dilettante. Of course, its meaning as someone who pursues something superficially has little to do with the original sense of the word. Dilettante comes from “delight,” a person who delights in an art, a connoisseur who possesses discrimination and taste, especially in aesthetic matters. From this perspective, that is precisely what both Gesualdo and Burney were—highly cultivated men with a refined musical sensibility. But for Sir Charles, a dilettante was one guilty of “deciding in a summary way, with prejudice in favor of his own little knowledge.” So that’s what he thought of Gesualdo. Determined to trace the origin of his curious chromatic art, Burney pursued a remark in Tassoni’s Pensieri diversi claiming the composer imitated the strange and plaintive style of Caledonian airs invented by James the 1st, King of Scotland. But after analyzing the two, Burney decided that Gesualdo’s madrigals not only had nothing to do with Caledonian melodies, but in fact “contain no melodies at all.” The only connection between the King of Scotland and the Prince of Verosa was simply that they were both dilettantes who composed equally worthless drivel. Burney even trashes Tassoni for making such a ridiculous comparison in the first place.

Although he admits “much has been attempted by this Prince, when performed there is more confusion than in any other composer. His modulation [translate progression], seems forced, affected, and disgusting. The Prince of Verosa,” barks Burney, “was perpetually straining at new expression and modulation, but seldom succeeded. Most of the sounds are accompanied with common chords, but such extraneous modulation is neither learned nor pleasing.” Burney cites Gesualdo’s Moro lasso—Alas, I die—as “a specimen of his harsh, crude, and licentious modulation.” He points to a chromatic progression C# major, A minor 6/3, B major, and G major 6/3 over a descending bass line C#, C, B, and concludes it’s “not only repugnant to every rule, but shocking and disgusting to the ear to go from one chord to another in which there is no relation, real or imaginary, composed of sounds wholly extraneous and foreign to any key. New modulation,” he says, “when guided by science and a nice ear is always welcome, but when it consists of such licentious and offensive deviations from rule”—and here’s the part I really like—“as constantly rejected by great professors, it can only be applauded by ignorance, depravity, and affectation.”

So now, what are we latter-day chromaticists to make of all this rant from one of the brightest bulbs of the Enlightenment? Burney’s denouncement of Gesualdo is perhaps our best evidence of an eighteenth-century assessment of chromaticism as an artless aberration. This was an age of immanent rationality, with a rage for clarity and transparent order, the age of Johnson’s definitions and Franklin’s bifocals. It gave birth to things like the price tag, standardized weights and measures, public signposts, and the accounting ledger. Coupled with Gesualdo’s heinous crime and hermetic withdrawal, his entangled madrigals were simply the demented creation of a demented mind. Chromaticism was musical murder, the corpus delicti of some compositional crime.
And yet, from Wagner to today, the history of music, not to mention our own presence here, would suggest otherwise. Gesualdo was in fact a visionary, the harbinger of a new musical practice, a one-man avant garde. In hindsight it looks like Burney, not Gesualdo, who’s the hapless dilettante, condemned in his own words, by “deciding in a summary way, with prejudice in favor of his own little knowledge.” Gesualdo’s chromatic cunning seems even more harmless now that our Institute has dutifully mapped out the remote regions of musical space. We’ve conquered chromaticism; its tonal frontier has been tamed and colonized. Chords have been tagged and neatly labeled; all conceivable pathways between them meticulously paved on a logical terrain. It’s all figured out and neatly sanitized: what used to be aberrant, uncanny, or even dangerous is now perfectly safe and tidy after all. Isn’t that what our Institute, indeed our profession, is all about?

But permit me toward the end of our pilgrimage to indulge a private confession. Like the curmudgeon Sir Charles, to my ears Gesualdo’s music, however intriguing, still sounds as Burney put it, a bit “forced and affected.” And in one sense—and here’s my darkest heresy—so too do many of his nineteenth-century henchmen, folks like Scriabin, Liszt, Reger, and the like. Despite its luxuriant multiplicity and the abstract elegance of the tonnetz, I sometimes get this queazy feeling of chromatic capriciousness, a sort of tonal vertigo, aimlessly meandering from syntax to salience on a slippery slope to anything goes. I also find my analytic ambitions chronically frustrated. And I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’m alone. I detect a twinge of regret in Brian Hyer’s lament that chromatic music “wanders between functionless harmonies that neutralize rather than progress to one another, sonorities that seem to float in the music, without a goal, without direction.” Now that doesn’t criminalize chromaticism, but if you’ve read Joe Straus’ recent diagnosis of musical disability, I sometimes wonder if some of these patients don’t suffer from acute chromatitus.

Now please don’t get me wrong. I appreciate succulent richness just as much as the next guy. I admire those toruses, towers, and mobius strips deciphering how I got from A to B, and the talmudic rationale of elaborate geometries. The message is delivered about hexatonic cycles, harmonic color, and hypermodulation. I feel the anguish of German poets, and wear full battle gear to join Deborah’s cry to “embrace the ambiguities.” And let there be no doubt: I take a backseat to no one in relishing distortion, even violation of conventionality—in music and just about everything else. I’m iconoclastic enough.

But secretly, what I sometimes miss in these musical spider webs is a greater sense of their simple intelligibility, their audible logic, what Carl Schachter calls great music’s “inner necessity.” I stand up and take my dissonance like a man along with Charles Ives, but not if I’m knee deep in harmonic quicksand. Art like politics, I think, teaches that our most cherished fantasies and creative freedoms are paradoxically grounded, tugging against some lawful framework of normative constraint. That’s what distinguishes them from indulgence and anarchy, from what Schenker decried as the mere “freedom of wild horses.” At least that was the eighteenth century’s view of things, that sense of delicate equilibrium between order and freedom, between creativity and constraint pervading Schiller’s aesthetic education and C.P.E. Bach’s musical handbook, which after the chromatic turbulence of the nineteenth century, Schenker sought nostalgically to restore, and Schoenberg quixotically to reinvent.

And if I may return to my original theme, this I think is the same sense of fragile equilibrium in the Declaration of Independence as a product of the Age of Reason. This motivates the logical necessity upon which Franklin predicated human rights, when he revised Jefferson’s initial draft to declare its fundamental freedoms not to be merely intuitive or mystically sacred, and therefore irrational, or rather arational, but immanently real, grounded and consciously self-evident, that is, evident in and of themselves.

Burney no doubt also found this same intrinsic intelligibility lacking in Gesualdo’s music as well. For him, like Benjamin, an appeal to anything beyond was simply too tenuous and uncertain to entertain. And as a man of the Enlightenment, he had no other basis for its appreciation. I, on the other hand, as a
postmodern man, drifting past the narrative of reason itself, am not so deterred. While I miss their coherence and question their freedom, I also confess to feeling in these curious chromatic juxtapositions an alluring and irrational mystique. And this, I’d like to think, is some godless echo of what Jefferson may have felt, sitting beneath the sycamores at Monticello, when he grounded human rights, and ultimately truth itself, in an invocation of the divine, as something beyond the rationality of his own mind. Yet whether he believed it or merely deferred to his mentor, Jefferson accepted Franklin’s replacement of the sacred by the self-evident, creating the manifesto, indeed the very sentence par excellent of rational democracy that governs today. We indeed hold these truths, our most sacred freedoms, to be immanently self-evident, perfectly reasonable, and unequivocally applicable to all.

Jefferson returned, however, to his original impulse in his later life. Shortly before his death in 1826, a year before Beethoven’s, as the Age of Reason captured in the stroke of Benjamin’s pen receded, Jefferson confessed to a new reawakening. “As I near the end of my voyage,” wrote the widowed father of three daughters, “I’ve learned to be less confident in the conclusions of human reason, and give more credit to the honesty of contrary opinions.” This in fact could also be the watchword for our own proceedings, along with Diderot’s admonition that the unquestioned remains unproved, valuing the dialectic of discourse over the certainty of our own convictions. Knowledge itself, says Gadamer, means considering opposites, not alone in our sanctuaries, but in dialogue with others in a forum such as this.

By the way, we don’t often hear Jefferson and Beethoven mentioned in the same breath, but both are transitional figures between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, straddling the Ages of Reason and Romance. An ocean apart, their genius spans two worlds, the rational and the intuitive, and transcends them both. Jefferson’s Declaration and Beethoven’s Fifth are among the great testaments of the human spirit because of this very dialectic. They share Schachter’s inner necessity, infused with a simultaneous sense of the sacred and the self-evident. They make the transcendent immanent, and come as close as we can to political and musical scripture. The definitive line of one is like the opening theme of the other, a compact and powerful idea upon which a great edifice is constructed. If America originated in a motive, then Jefferson is its composer.

Shortly after the turn of the century, as Beethoven finished his Second Symphony, Jefferson took stock of his own accomplishments. First, he says, he removed obstructions on the Rivanna River near his home in Virginia where he liked to canoe. Next, he simply mentions the Declaration of Independence. After that, he says, he brought olives from Marseilles to Georgia and African rice to the Carolinas. “The greatest service which can be rendered any country,” he explains, “is to add a useful plant to its culture, especially a bread grain.” “I’ve sometimes asked myself whether the world is a better place for my having lived at all,” Jefferson reflected. And in words that still astonish me, he concluded, “I don’t know that it is. I’ve been the instrument of doing many things. But they would have been done by others—and some of them perhaps a little better.”