AN ANALYSIS OF JOAN TOWER’S SOLO KEYBOARD WORKS

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BY

JI-YOUNG JEOUNG

DISSERTATION ADVISORS:

ROBERT PALMER

KIRBY KORIATH

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Joan Peabody Tower is one of America’s most significant living composers in the classical music world. Tower’s 1991 *Concerto for Orchestra* was commissioned by three major American orchestras: the Chicago Symphony, New York Philharmonic, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.¹ Her five short orchestral pieces, entitled *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, have been played by over 500 different instrument ensembles.²

*Sequoia* (1981) is one of her most acclaimed orchestral works. It was selected as the representative American work in honor of United Nations Day by the New York Philharmonic in 1982.³ Recently many internationally renowned orchestras have played *Sequoia*, including the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, NHK Symphony Orchestra-Tokyo, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and the Banff Festival Orchestra.⁴

Tower recorded *Made in America* on the Naxos recording label in 2008.⁵ This recording received three Grammy Awards including Classical Album, Orchestral

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⁵ *Made In America, Tambor, Con certo for Orchestra*: Performers: Nashville Symphony Orchestra, ensemble; Leonard Slatkin, conductor. Naxos 8559328.
Performance, and Classical Contemporary Composition.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Made in America} was the first composition of the Ford “Made in America” program. This program is a partnership of the League of American Orchestras and Meet the Composer groups. \textit{Made in America} has been performed more than seventy times in all fifty states.

Tower’s \textit{Petrovsheskates} was recognized as “one of the 101 most significant compositions for small ensembles” by Chamber Music America in 2004.\textsuperscript{7} Tower has received numerous other honors including the 1973 Naumberg Award as a member of Da Capo Chamber Ensemble, the 1990 Grawemeyer Award for her composition \textit{Silver Ladders}, the Delaware Symphony’s 1998 Alfred I. DuPont Award for Distinguished American Composers, and a membership from American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998. Other honors were the 2002 Annual Composer’s Award from the Lancaster Symphony, the 2004 Academy of Arts and Sciences Award at Harvard University, the 2004 Eddie Medora King Award for Musical Composition from University of Texas at Austin, and an honorary doctorate from the New England Conservatory of Music in 2006.\textsuperscript{8} She has also received numerous commissions, including the following: The National Endowment for the Arts in 1974 for \textit{Breakfast Rhythms I and II}, The Koussevitzsky Foundation in 1982 for \textit{Music for Cello and Orchestra}, The Schubert Club in 1982 for \textit{Snow Dreams}, The Walter W. Naumburg Foundation in 1988 for \textit{Clarinet Concerto}, and the Juilliard School in 2005 for \textit{Copperwave} for its centennial celebration. The work was premiered by the American Brass Quintet.\textsuperscript{9}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Grolman, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Wise.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Grolman, 76.
\end{itemize}
In 2004 her representative works were performed for a Carnegie Hall *Making Music* Series by The Tokyo String Quartet, pianists Melvin Chen and Ursula Oppens, violist Paul Neubauer, oboist Richard Woodhams, and the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble.\(^\text{10}\)

She has been a conductor for the American Symphony, the Hudson Valley Philharmonic, the Scotia Festival Orchestra, the Anchorage Symphony, and the Kalisto Chamber Orchestra.\(^\text{11}\)

A professor at Bard College, Tower is active as a composer, conductor, performer, and lecturer. She has been selected to be the commissioned composer for the San Antonio International Piano Competition, 2009.\(^\text{12}\) As a pianist, Tower performed her own piece, *Dumbarton Quintet*, with the Muir Quartet on May 4, 2009, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C.\(^\text{13}\)

I was very honored to be able to attend the concert for Tower’s seventieth birthday that was held at Merkin Concert Hall in New York City on September 6, 2008. Tower received the American Music Center’s Letter of Distinction at that concert.\(^\text{14}\) The Da Capo Chamber Players, a group Tower played with as a pianist for fifteen years, celebrated her birthday at Merkin Concert Hall on September 8, 2008.\(^\text{15}\) Other Joan Tower birthday celebrations included concerts performed by The Cassatt Quartet, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, plus twenty-five other concerts across the nation.

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{12}\) Interview with the author.


St. Luke’s Chamber Ensemble’s Second Helpings Contemporary Music Series will include Tower’s compositions in their concerts. The first was held on February 26, 2008. The second was held in March, 2009. Tower is currently in her tenth and last season as St. Luke’s resident composer.16

**Statement of Purpose**

Although Joan Tower is a very celebrated American composer, no analytical research of her complete solo keyboard works has been undertaken so far. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss Joan Tower’s solo keyboard compositions through 2007; this includes five piano solo pieces and an organ solo piece. I have communicated with Joan Tower on many occasions via mail and e-mail. Excerpts from the interview that I conducted with Tower in her home in Red Hook, New York, on November 1, 2008, are included in my analysis.

**Delimitations**

Although she is currently working on new keyboard compositions, the focus of this study is Joan Tower’s solo keyboard compositions through 2007. I will exclude piano chamber music from the discussion. Much has been written about Joan Tower’s feminist point of view. This topic, however, will not be a part of my dissertation.

**Methodology**

In the body of the dissertation, I will organize Tower’s music into two periods. In her first period music I will focus on twelve-tone row forms and contemporary keyboard techniques as found in *Circles* and *Fantasia*. In her second period works I will discuss these characteristics: one movement structures, organic composition writing, and motivic

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development, as found in *Red Garnet Waltz, No Longer Very Clear, Ascent*, and *Big Steps*. Further, I will include a discussion of scales, harmony, rhythm, and some performance issues that relate to Tower’s score indications and her special use of pedaling.

**Overview of the study**

Chapter One includes an introduction, a discussion of the significance of this study, the delimitations, and the methodology. Chapter Two is a review of available literature about Joan Tower. Chapter Three includes a brief biography and a discussion of Tower’s development as a composer. Chapter Four is an explanation of the titles and origins of Tower’s solo keyboard works. Chapter Five is an analysis of the characteristics of Tower’s solo keyboard works and a brief discussion of performance issues that I encountered. Chapter Six includes a summary of the analysis and suggestions for further study.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ellen K. Grolman, a music scholar and faculty member at Frostburg State University in Maryland, published *Joan Tower: The Comprehensive Bio-Bibliography* in 2007. The book includes a discussion of Tower’s biography, her “musical voice,” works, performances, pictures, discography, peer reflections, and bibliography notes. Grolman addresses Tower’s family history, her childhood through college, and her life during the 1960s and 1970s. Also discussed are Tower’s participation with the Da Capo Chamber Players, her association with Bard College, her work in the 1980s, her international presence; her work from 1990 to 2006 when she became completely comfortable using her own music style, and finally, her life at home in Red Hook, New York.

Grolman also introduces and discusses Tower’s “musical voice.” According to Grolman, Tower’s musical voice includes organic composition and the use of special titles, forms and structures. Grolman also discusses Tower’s musical influences, the composing process, the state of contemporary music, musical citizenship, and musical feminism.

Grolman then discusses Tower’s works and performances. Tower created works for band, stage, orchestra, chamber ensemble, and solo instruments. (My dissertation is limited to the piano works and an organ piece.) Grolman’s discussion of Tower’s catalog is well organized with titles, publishers, duration, instrumentation, movements, selected performances, and recordings. Grolman also includes the composer’s early unpublished...
compositions and the 2004 solo piano piece, Big Steps. The book also refers to some pieces written by Tower’s friends and dedicated to her, including works in progress as well as early, unpublished works, written for or dedicated to Joan Tower.

Grolman divides the discography into two parts. The first part of the discography includes other performers of her works as well as Tower’s own performances, and also the ensembles that have recorded her works. The keyboard recordings by other performers include: Ascent, No Longer Very Clear, Piano Concerto No.1, Rapids (Piano Concerto no.2), Red Garnet Waltz, and Stepping Stones. As a pianist, Tower played Big Sky with violinist Chee-Yun and cellist André Emelianoff, Movements for Flute and Piano with Patricia Spencer, and Très Lent in Black Topaz with cellist André Emelianoff. As a conductor, Tower recorded Black Topaz.

The second part of the discography is Joan Tower’s own piano performances, playing other composer’s works. Tower performed as pianist with the Da Capo Chamber Players on all five of the groups’ released CDs.

Grolman’s book is a well-organized compilation of Joan Tower’s life and career, through 2006. Two of the pianists mentioned in the book, Ursula Oppens and Paul Barnes, describe in peer reflections how they met Tower. Grolman includes a thorough bibliography containing books, articles, and dissertations relating to Tower.

There is an article in the New Grove Dictionary of Music by Sharon Prado Howard that addresses the life and music of Joan Tower. This article includes Tower’s biography and a brief description of her musical compositions, focusing on instrumental and orchestral works. Howard includes only compositions written through 1996. There are four keyboard pieces discussed: Red Garnet Waltz (1977), Or like a...an Engine

\[17\] Grolman, 95.

In the *Oxford Companion to Music*, Paul Griffiths presents a brief biography of Tower’s different styles of music with examples of her chamber and orchestral works. Griffiths mentions *Red Garnet Waltz* (solo piano), *Platinum Spirals* (violin), and *Black Topaz* (piano and six instruments) as examples of what Tower labels “mineral pieces.”\(^{19}\)

Janet Nichols’ *Women Music Makers: An Introduction to Women Composers*\(^{20}\) presents more detailed information about Tower’s family life. Joan Tower’s father sang and played the violin and her father’s mother was a pianist. Nichols describes Tower’s life from her time in South America until her time as composer-in-residence with the St. Louis Symphony.

In Carol Neuls-Bate’s *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*,\(^{21}\) information about Tower’s childhood and time with the Da Capo Chamber Players is provided in an interview format.

Sophie Fuller’s *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States 1629-Present* also discusses Tower’s life and career.\(^{22}\) Fuller analyzes Tower’s style in major works such as *Breakfast Rhythms I and II*, *Red Garnet Waltz*, and *Silver Ladders*.

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Mary Lou Humphrey’s *Joan Tower*, published in 1991, discusses Tower’s life, musical influences, and works. Humphrey organized a list of the compositions at the end of the biography.  

Jane Weiner LePage’s *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the 20th Century: Selected Biographies* describes Tower’s time at Bennington College when she studied composition, and her years as a pianist-composer with Da Capo Players.

Brian Wise’s *Joan Tower*, an online PDF file, includes recent information on Tower. He examines the characteristics of her music and briefly discusses her life. Wise discusses her career as a composer-performer, specifically as a female composer. Wise writes about her orchestral works including *Piano Concerto* (1985), which Tower indicates as “an homage to Beethoven.” Additionally, this article alphabetically organizes her Associated Music Publishers’ published works including: *Ascent, No Longer Very Clear (Holding a Daisy, Or like a...an Engine, Vast Antique Cubes/Throbbing Still)*, *Piano Concerto No.1*, *Piano Concerto No.2*, and *Stepping Stones*. These are categorized by genres (ballet, orchestra, band, and chamber/ solo), first performances, and duration.


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24 LePage, 273-274.
25 Wise.
Composers. Laura Koplewitz’s article *Joan Tower: Building Bridges for New Music* discusses her compositional approach as performer-composer.

Tower’s early works are described in Ellen Dale Lerner’s *The Music of Selected Contemporary American Women Composers: A Stylistic Analysis*. Lerner focuses on *Prelude for Five Players* (1970) and *Breakfast Rhythms I* (1975). Lerner analyzes the basic twelve-tone row and six sections in *Prelude For Five Players*. She notes two characteristics: “organic motivic unity and balancing as stemming from the Beethoven tradition.”

In her compositions Tower often evokes imagery by using descriptive titles such as *Sequoia* and *Silver Ladders*. *Sequoia* was discussed in Nicholas Kenyon’s article “Musical Events: Triangle.” *Silver Ladders* was addressed both in Donald Jay Grout’s *A History of Western Music, seventh edition* and Peter Goodman’s article, “Joan Tower, Scaling the Heights.” Interestingly, a comparative study between *Sequoia* and *Silver Ladders* is presented in Sharon S. Prado’s “New Wine into Old Bottles: Traditional Media and Contemporary Women Composers.”

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Allan Kozin observes in “Essay in D: The Critic’s Cogitation About Titles,”36 that Tower changed the title of her first quartet from “Nightmare” to “Night Fields.” Tower apparently struggled to come up with a suitable title for the piece. She described the piece in a program note as, “a cold windy night in a wheat field lit up by a bright full moon, with waves of fast moving colors.” Perhaps the title Night Fields better describes the mood of the music.

Authors of dissertations use a variety of analytical techniques. Nancy E. Leckie Bonds’ An Analysis of Joan Tower’s Wings for Solo Clarinet37 describes four different analytical techniques: formal, Hindemithian melodic, graphic, and linear (Shenkerian) analysis. John Fletcher’s Joan Tower’s Fascinating Ribbons for Band: Genesis and Analysis38 presents three types of analysis: descriptive (melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture), graphic (forces in use, pitch range, pitch density, attack frequency, and dynamics), and imagery analysis. Glenn R. Singleton’s Contrast and Unity in Silver Ladders by Joan Tower includes analysis of melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture.39 Shannon Marie Ford’s Wings: A Performance Analysis of Joan Tower’s Work for Solo Alto Saxophone includes a theoretical analysis of form, melody/harmony, and rhythm.40

Authors have included several new ways of analyzing Tower’s music. First, there is a new energy line analysis completed in Laura Shouha’s The Musical Language of

38 John Fletcher, “Joan Tower’s Fascinating Ribbons for Band: Genesis and Analysis” (DMA diss., The University of Oklahoma, 2002).
Joan Tower: *An Energy Line Analysis of Island Prelude for Oboe and Wind Quartet.

The energy line analysis finds three directions: up, stay in the same place, and down.\textsuperscript{41}

Second, there is action analysis in which action is more important than pitches or chords. Action analysis is addressed by Rochelle Lynn Oddo.\textsuperscript{42} Oddo also analyzed Tower’s *Turning Points* from the performer’s point of view.

Third, Kristy Ann Bryden uses the term “closural processes” to describe Tower’s five late twentieth-century chamber works, including *Petroushskates*. Bryden argues that musical motions such as musical growth, stasis, decline, and motion are expressed through lines of intensity. Bryden uses graphs to visualize the rising and falling sense of intensity in a work.\textsuperscript{43}

Tower’s musical characteristics are organized into three aspects in a dissertation titled, *An Analysis of Joan Tower’s Petroushskates*, by Elizabeth Christine Meyer. She describes Tower’s three aspects as the recreation of initial motives, harmonic change from diatonic to octatonic sections, and the shifting between metrical ambiguity and stability.\textsuperscript{44} A thorough discussion of Tower’s usage of octatonic scales can be found in Charles Hoag’s *In Quest of Silver Ladders in the Americas*.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{41} Laura Shouha “The Musical Language of Joan Tower; An Energy Line Analysis of Island Prelude for Oboe and Wind Quartet” (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2001).

\textsuperscript{42} Rochelle Lynn Oddo, “Joan Tower’s Compositional Profile, Use of the Clarinet, and Collaboration in Turning Points for Clarinet and String Quartet” (DMA diss., Rice University, 2003).


\textsuperscript{44} Elizabeth Christine Meyer “An Analysis of Joan Tower’s Petroushskates” (DMA diss., Northwestern University, 1999).

Tower’s musical style is addressed in Myrna Frances Schloss’ *Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity* 46 and Crawford’s *Joan Tower’s Violin Concerto: An Organic Approach to Composition*. 47

In *Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity*, Schloss argues that Tower’s works are usually written in one extended movement form with several themes and changes of second centers.

By comparing Tower’s violin concerto with Zwilich’s violin concerto, Ann Rylands 48 examines Tower’s thematic and harmonic unity using traditional musical ideas. These ideas are recurrences of the themes and motives and clearly defined areas of contrast.

Robert Dale Janssen’s *Intuition and Analysis: A Performer’s Perspective on Joan Tower’s Fantasy for Clarinet and Piano* 49 discusses performance issues including such topics as form, themes, phrasing, texture and balance.

Rhythm and tempo, articulation, dynamics, and timbre are discussed in Carol Wincenc’s article “Performing Tower’s Concerto.” 50 In the *Flute Concerto*, Tower controlled the volume by avoiding overpowering orchestral sounds. To make the flute sounds more prevalent, Tower did not use horns. Wincenc marked her comments and breath marks on the solo flute score in order to help the flutists’ performances. 51

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46 Myrna Frances Schloss, “Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity” (Ph.D. Wesleyan University, 1993).
47 Heather A. Crawford, “Joan Tower’s Violin concerto: An Organic Approach to Composition” (DMA, the University of Texas at Austin, 2002).
51 Ibid., 14-15.
Pamela Youngdahl Dees’ *Piano Music by Women Composers: Women Born After 1900* briefly addresses Tower’s piano works, including *Circles, Fantasia, Holding a Daisy, Or like a...an Engine, Red Garnet Waltz, and Stepping Stones*. Tower’s music is organized alphabetically with characteristics, publishers, and durations. Maurice Hinson’s *Guide to the Pianist’s Repertoire* includes only *Or Like a...an Engine* with a brief description. Interestingly, the previous edition of Hinson’s book (2nd edition, 1998) made no mention of Tower’s piano works. Allan Kozinn’s “Review/Music; Poetic Call and Response As a Tribute to WNYC” described *Or like a...an Engine* as “a rapid, motoric, slightly spiky piano piece.” This article contains part of John Ashbery’s poem, *No Longer Very Clear*, which was the basis for Tower’s piano piece of the same name. Allan Kozinn’s “Fanny Mendelssohn Was Audacious, Too” includes two of Tower’s works *Holding a Daisy, and Or like a...an Engine* of *No Longer Very Clear*. Anne Midgette’s “A Multitude of Voices, All From Pianos” notes that in meditative pieces there is a great deal of space between individual sounds, the style used in *Vast Antique Cubes*.

Tower’s early piano works, *Circles* and *Fantasia*, include new notations for performance. Doris Leland Harrel’s dissertation *New Techniques in Twentieth Century Piano Music-An Expansion of Pianistic Resources from Cowell to the Present* explains

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the new symbols and piano techniques with many examples. Harrel addresses notational symbols, including clusters, pedals, glissando, and plucking or striking strings inside the piano.

Valuable information about Red Garnet Waltz is addressed in Peter G. Davis’ “Pianos Still Stir Composers’ Souls”, and Allan Kozinn’s “Robert Helps, 73, Concert Pianist and a Wide-Ranging Composer.” Kyung-Ae Kim’s dissertation, Concert Waltzes for Solo Piano, describes the keyboard techniques Tower used in Red Garnet Waltz.

Mia Chung’s dissertation, The Contemporary Piano Concerto: a Blend of Old and New Treatments as Seen in Works by Peter Lieberson, Joan Tower, and Ellen Zwilich, examines Tower’s Piano Concerto No. 1. Chung describes Tower’s varied thematic ideas, her loose structure, the controlled piano techniques, and different textures and sound colors between the piano and orchestra.

Information on Piano Concerto No. 1 is discussed in two newspaper articles. Bernard Holland’s “Music: Tower Concerto” mentions Tower’s “Beethovenian” quality, whole-tone scales, and percussion effects. Mark Stryker addresses how Tower was influenced by Beethoven when she wrote her Piano Concerto No. 1.

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58 Doris Leland Harrel, “New Techniques in Twentieth Century Solo Piano Music—an Expansion of Pianistic Resources from Cowell to the present” (DMA diss., The University of Texas, Austin, 1976).
64 Mark Stryker, “To Thine Own Talent be True Classical Composer Joan Tower, 59, Endured Many Frustrations/before she learned that in music, as in life, honesty is the best policy,” Detroit Free Press (May 31, 1998), E1.
Sandra Hyslop explains Tower’s Stepping Stones: A Ballet (1993) in the CD liner notes. Anthony Tommasini discusses Tower’s Vast Antique Cubes/Throbbing Still and her use of whole-tone scales, neo-primitive motives, percussive rhythms that were influenced by Stravinsky, and ‘arm-blurring’ chordal passages.

Abbey Hallberg Siegfried’s dissertation Contemporary American Organ Music: Defining the Compositional Potential of the Pipe Organ in Conversations with Composers examines Tower’s organ piece, Ascent. Siegfried surveyed many contemporary American composers in order to detail their opinions on organ works. This research is not an in-depth analysis of Ascent, but merely Tower’s brief opinions on organ works and the compositional process for organ.

Presented above are various books, articles and dissertations on Joan Tower’s keyboard works. As stated in my purpose for this dissertation, there are no studies that have researched her complete solo keyboard works in depth.

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CHAPTER THREE
JOAN TOWER’S LIFE AND WORK

A Brief Biography

The following information comes from my personal interview with Joan Tower in her home on Nov. 1, 2008, as well as previously discussed literature. Joan Tower was born in New Rochelle, New York, on September 6, 1938. She grew up in Larchmont, New York. Tower spent the first nine years of her life in a very comfortable family environment in Larchmont. She spoke of her early childhood, “I had my little peanut butter sandwiches and my little bicycle with a basket, and box lunch. I went to school and had a lot of friends. It was all a very kind of idyllic, wonderful, safe environment.”  

Tower’s father was a mining engineer. When Tower was nine years old her father moved his family to Bolivia, South America, to accept a new position. According to Tower, the move “shook me up…a new language, a new culture, a new everything.” She described her first impressions of South America by saying that it was traumatic because she couldn’t speak the language; she was only nine years old and she had been in a comfortable environment before. This new country was a frightening environment, because it seemed to have frequent revolutions. “I thought it was pretty traumatic at first. But, I was nine years old so I had a lot of flexibility. I bounced back pretty fast, and I learned Spanish in three months.”

She came to love South America and the Latin

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68 Interview with the author.
69 Ibid.
people. It gave her a whole new perspective on another culture apart from the United States.

Tower began her interest in percussion instruments through dancing to South American music. She went to festivals where her nanny often left Tower with a band, and so Tower eventually learned to play instruments with the bands.

There were these wild festivals where women wore colorful, multiple skirts and men wore devil masks, and they danced and danced. I wanted to participate, so they would hand me a percussion instrument—I was 9 or 10 at the time—and I would bang on the drums, maracas and tambourines.70

Here she developed a love of percussion and dancing, which became important in her music.

During this period in South America Tower studied piano with the former wife of Erich von Stroheim, a famous movie director. Recognizing that Tower was gifted, the teacher used a strict disciplinary approach in her instruction and Tower’s music skills advanced quickly.

After five years living in Bolivia, Tower was sent to school in Santiago, Chile, for two years. She attended a very strict boarding school where she was unhappy because the atmosphere seemed to restrict her individuality.

When Tower’s father became ill with tuberculosis, the family moved to Lima, Peru, so that her father could go to a special hospital there. She said that she enjoyed her time living in Lima because she got a whole year away from school. She enjoyed horseback riding and even attended secretarial school where she learned shorthand and typing.71

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Because Tower’s father continued to suffer with tuberculosis the family decided to return to the United States. From 1954 to 1956 she attended Walnut Hill, a private school in Boston, MA. She did not like it there because at that time it was an upper class, elitist school. This school, however, is very different now and has become a performing arts school with a wide-ranging multicultural body of students. Tower accepted an invitation to participate in a spring 2009 celebrity series there.\footnote{Ibid.}

Tower’s spent her first two years of college at Wheelock Teachers College in Boston. She couldn’t go to her first choice of colleges because of her previous low grades. During this time she considered a transfer to Radcliffe in order to be closer to her boyfriend, who was at Harvard.

Although she never attended Radcliffe, a two-hour interview with the admission’s officer there changed her life. The admission’s officer at Radcliffe was fascinated by Tower’s interesting background. She suggested that Tower investigate Bennington College in Vermont, which Tower had never heard of. The admission’s officer told Tower if she did not like Bennington, they would work together to try to get Tower admitted to Radcliffe. But the officer said she did not think Tower would be happy at Radcliffe because it was a very intellectual, scholarly kind of place. In fact, Tower said, “Radcliffe was not my cup of tea and she knew that…She was absolutely right. She saved my life. I paid tribute to her when I gave the commencement speech at Bennington.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Tower studied at Bennington College from 1958 to 1961.

Tower started to compose at the age of eighteen while in Bennington. Her first piece was a class assignment but she decided it was horrible. She remembered the piece

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
as having thirteen instruments. “I think it was in the style of *Bolero* because I had no control over form. It was like adding—one instrument then two instruments.”\(^7^4\) She wrote another piece that seemed a little better. Tower said “Composing was a way into music that was so different from playing the piano. That kept my curiosity up. The torture was still there, but it was another way into music. I have always been interested in different ways to experience music.”\(^7^5\)

It took her years to like anything she wrote. Tower studied composition with Louis Calabro, Henry Brant, and Lionel Novak while she was a student at Bennington. Her piano teacher, Mr. Nowak, inspired her to practice more hours for him than anybody else ever had and this improved her skill. George Finkel (the uncle of David Finkel from the Emerson Quartet), the cello teacher at Bennington, was also a major influence for her. She said that they played Beethoven sonatas together. “Bennington was the perfect place for me because I could play all day and compose the rest of the time. I just blossomed like a flower there.”\(^7^6\)

She graduated from Bennington with a Bachelor’s degree in music in 1961. She earned a Master’s of Music in composition at Columbia University in 1964.\(^7^7\) In 1969, she started teaching at Greenwich Music House in New York where she founded the distinguished instrumental ensemble, Da Capo Chamber Players (first known as the Empire Chamber Players). She performed as pianist with this group from 1969 until 1984.\(^7^8\)

\(^7^4\) Ibid.  
\(^7^5\) Ibid.  
\(^7^6\) Ibid.  
\(^7^7\) Nichols, 156.  
\(^7^8\) Barbara Jepson, A1.
During the 1960s and 1970s, Tower composed in the twelve-tone compositional style. It was during this time that she met Charles Wuorinen at a Bennington College composers’ summer conference. Mr. Wuorinen introduced Tower to her first husband, Walter Howard O’Brien, a jazz pianist and composer to whom she was married for ten years. Tower is now married for 35 years to Jeff Litfin, an amateur musician and retired business man.

Tower was a member of a younger generation of composers in New York in the 1960s and 70s. Her style of composition was greatly influenced by her association with Milton Babbitt. Babbitt wrote the recommendation letter supporting Tower for a National Endowment for the Arts Grant.80

In 1978, Tower received a doctorate in composition from Columbia University. Her dissertation was titled “Breakfast Rhythms I and II.” In this piece she started to change her style from serialism to her own individual voice.81

Tower started teaching at Bard College as a part-time instructor in 1972. She gradually increased her responsibilities there until 1985. From 1985 to 1988 she was the composer-in-residence with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra.82 While at the St. Louis Symphony, she was a very active part of the Meet the Composer/Orchestra Residencies Program. Then in 1988, she returned to Bard and was offered the full-time endowed Asher Edelman Professorship, which she still holds. From 1995 to 2003, she was the composer-in-residence at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. In addition, from 1998 to 2008 she was composer-in-residence with the St. Luke’s Orchestra in New York

79 Interview with the author.
80 Grolman, 8.
81 Interview with the author.
82 Barbara Jepson, A1.
City. Since 1998 she has also been composer-in-residence at the Deer Valley Music Festival in Utah.\(^8^3\) In 2007-08 she was Season Composer with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.\(^8^4\)

**Joan Tower’s Development as a Composer**

Tower was influenced by Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen during the first part of her career. Her early works included very detailed and complex rhythms that were associated with serial music.\(^8^5\) She used abstract titles such as *Percussion Quartet* (1963, rev. 1969), *Movements for Flute and Piano* (1968), *Prelude for Five Players* (1972), *Hexachords* (1972), and *Six Variations for Cello* (1971).\(^8^6\) Later she used descriptive titles for her compositions, as will be discussed below.

Tower’s style changed from serial compositions to a more organic and romantic style in 1974-75. Her transitional piece was *Breakfast Rhythms I and II* for clarinet and five other instruments (1974-75). According to Tower, *Breakfast Rhythms I* was still in the serial mode, but *Breakfast Rhythms II* started to step out to a different mode.\(^8^7\) In *Breakfast Rhythms II*, she employed pentatonic and whole-tone scales.\(^8^8\) Tower explains the significance of her next composition in the following manner:

I wrote a piece called *Black Topaz*. That was the changing piece. It was written for piano and six instruments. *Black Topaz* is a significant piece in my repertoire.

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\(^8^5\) Humphrey, 1.

\(^8^6\) Wise.

\(^8^7\) Neuls-Bates, 347.

\(^8^8\) Fuller, 312.
It is a real attempt to use my own voice in a raw, straight-forward and risky way. I still like that piece. I wrote it in 1976. \(^{89}\)

Tower tries to communicate with both performers and audiences. She stated, “I want my music to be heard and received.”\(^{90}\) “When I realize I’ve made the musicians feel excited about a piece, the rewards are incredible.”\(^{91}\)

Tower’s dual careers as composer and performer mirror other composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff. According to Tower, today, we live in a performer’s world, primarily. People are out of touch with composers and tend to forget that we’re flesh-and-blood human beings. As a performer and composer, I have been in both those worlds for twenty years, and I see this lack of contact as a big problem.\(^{92}\)

Tower tries to compose in a common language for ideal musical communication. She said,

As a performer, I understand that sometimes you want to keep the composer as far as possible from your rehearsal work. My group, Da Capo, would just as soon prefer that the composer not be there half the time. The performers want to re-compose the piece, in a sense, to really make it their own. If a composer is there saying, ‘could you play that A-flat louder?’ or ‘this piece is really about a princess dancing in the woods with little water-nymphs,’ the performers feel constrained.\(^{93}\)

Tower understands performers’ views of composers. According to Tower, when it comes to new music, there are two types of performers. She said, “Some performers are afraid that if they commission music and then play the piece poorly or find the composition is not a good one, it will therefore reflect negatively on their own playing.”\(^{94}\)

There are some performers who ask a composer to write specifically for their instruments. Then there appears a large amount of modern literature for flute or piano,

\(^{89}\) Interview with the author.
\(^{90}\) Bonds, 26.
\(^{92}\) Koplewitz, 36.
\(^{93}\) Ibid.,37.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 38-39.
for example. If there is not the same amount of modern literature for other instruments, this probably just means performers of the other instruments did not make any request.\textsuperscript{95}

Tower also considers the composition from the point of view of the performer. According to Tower, a composer must understand the traditions of the repertoire. A composer must also communicate with players about any unusual notation related to the performance.

Before writing new music, Tower tries to spend time understanding performers and their instruments. According to Tower,

You can’t be shy with performers when you want to write for them. For a composer to write a really good piece, you have to know the characteristics of the performers you’re writing for. You have to spend time with them, go to their concerts, even play music with them. You have to know how to talk with them, what questions to ask about their instruments.\textsuperscript{96}

During the 1970s, Tower composed for the Da Capo Chamber Players having a conscious, intuitive knowledge about each instrument they played. She explored many musical possibilities with this group. She wrote \textit{Six Variations for Cello} for cellist Helen Harbison in 1971; \textit{Breakfast Rhythms I and II} (1974-75) for clarinetist Allen Blustine; \textit{Hexachords} for flutist Patricia Spencer in 1972; \textit{Platinum Spirals} for violinist Joel Lester in 1976; and \textit{Wings} for clarinetist Laura Flax in 1981.\textsuperscript{97} She decided to compose for particular players prior to writing a piece. For example, Tower wrote \textit{Rapids (Piano Concerto No.2, 1996)} and \textit{Or like a..an Engine} (1995) for Ursula Oppens; \textit{Vast Antique Cubes} (2000) and \textit{Throbbing Still} (2000) for John Browning; \textit{Music for Cello and Orchestra} (1984) for André Emelianoff; \textit{Night Fields} (1994) for the Muir String Quartet; \textit{Rainwaves} (1997) for the Verdehr Trio; \textit{DNA} (2003) for Frank Epstein and the New

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 39-40.
\textsuperscript{97} Singleton, 5.

Tower’s entry into the orchestral world was *Amazon II* (1979) for full orchestra. This work was adapted from *Amazon* (1977), a chamber piece she had previously written for five instruments. The Hudson Valley Philharmonic performed *Amazon II* on November 15, 1979. Next, Tower’s *Sequoia* (1981) was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra. Two conductors, Dennis Davies and Zubin Mehta, performed *Sequoia* several times. After *Sequoia*, Tower composed more works for orchestra in addition to solo and chamber pieces.98

Tower held the position of composer-in-residence with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra from 1985 to 1988 by invitation from Leonard Slatkin. During this time, Tower composed these two works: *Island Rhythms* (1985) for oboe and strings, and *Silver Ladders* (1987) for orchestra. For this orchestral composition, she later received the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award (1988) and the prestigious Charles B. Grawemeyer Award with a $150,000 prize (1990).

Several of Tower’s works give acknowledgment to her favorite composers, including the *Piano Concerto No. 1* (Beethoven), *Petroushskates* (Stravinsky), *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman* (Copland), *Night Fields* (Shostakovich), *Très lent* (Messiaen), and *Big Steps* (Debussy).99

Generally in her compositions Tower evokes imagery with descriptive titles. Tower prefers descriptive titles for her compositions, instead of relying on program notes.

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98 Koplewitz, 36.
For her a descriptive title is much better than just a label like *Piece No. 12*. She said, “I prefer an image with an action. *Sequoia* is related to the huge tree and its tiny needles. *Wings* for clarinet describes the swift, graceful flight of falcons.”

*Silver Ladders* includes the obvious two elements, silver and ladders. Tower explained the title *Silver Ladders* by saying, “*Silver* can be both gossamer and heavy. It’s the other side of the coin, lyrical, molten, almost arpeggiated, broken rather than scalar. The action is back-and-forth. *Ladders* refers to the climbing motif of the first movement. It gets more and more elaborate, driving upward consistently.”

Tower’s titles come also from the world of nature: *Sequoia, Amazon, Island Rhythms, Island Prelude, Rapids (Piano Concerto no. 2), Rain Waves, Wings, DNA,* and *Snow Dreams*. Other titles describe general motion: *Ascent, Stepping Stones,* and *Big Steps*. Tower also created titles from lines of the poem in *No Longer Very Clear*. Her piano collection of the same name includes *Holding a Daisy, Or like a…an Engine, Vast Antique Cubes, Throbbing Still*, which are from verses in this poem. Other pieces pay homage to her father, a mining engineer. These pieces include *Black Topaz* (1976) for piano and six other instruments, *Platinum Spirals* (1976) for violin, and *Red Garnet Waltz* (1977) for piano.

As was the case for many 20th century composers, Tower’s emphasis and creative use of rhythm became a foundational element in her writing. According to Tower, “Rhythm is the most important thing. The sense of moving from one place to another—within the rhythm, within the line—is very important, because the dynamics and the

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100 Goodman, entertainment section.
101 Ibid.
register all come out of that sense of flowing, driving and falling.”\textsuperscript{102} Her interest in rhythm grew from her association with South American dance music, and with the complex meters and rhythms of serial music.\textsuperscript{103}

As a pianist in Da Capo Chamber Players, Tower learned how to negotiate virtuosic rhythms in serial music. According to Tower, “It was a point of pride to be able to count very complicated music”\textsuperscript{104} Later in her career, Tower switched from the more difficult serial pieces to more manageable pieces. She no longer used thick textures and pointilistic action.\textsuperscript{105}

Tower wrote many pieces that feature the percussion; DNA for five percussionists; \textit{Strike Zones} for percussion and orchestra; and \textit{Tambor}, an orchestra work featuring the percussion section.\textsuperscript{106}

Tower composes exclusively for solo instruments, chamber ensembles and orchestras. She has not composed for singers except for a short children’s choir piece, \textit{Can I} (2007).\textsuperscript{107} There are also two active percussionists in the piece. Tower wrote the words and music for \textit{Can I}, a work commissioned and premiered by the Young People’s Chorus of New York City (YPC). She stated the title expresses the question ‘can I be heard?’ that children sometimes wonder. YPC being a multicultural chorus Tower chose to incorporate different languages. Since Tower grew up in South America she felt comfortable using some Spanish words and also added a few Yiddish words.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{102} Rebecca Rischin, “Master Class: \textit{Wings} by Joan Tower,” \textit{The Clarinet} 26 (March, 1999), 6.
\textsuperscript{103} Interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{104} Grolman, 27.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{107} Grolman, 35.
For Tower, words are not essential to writing music. She observed, “I personally have trouble with the intrusion of verbal meaning since it is shifting the agenda to the those words.”


As of 2007, Tower’s keyboard compositions include one organ piece (*Ascent*), five solo piano pieces (*Circles, Fantasia, Red Garnet Waltz, No Longer Very Clear, Big Steps*), two *Piano Concertos* (*Homage to Beethoven, Rapids*), and one two-piano piece (*Stepping Stones*).

Tower’s first compositional period contains serial pieces. These pieces from the 1960s are influenced by contemporary composers such as Wuorinen and Babbitt. Her two published solo keyboard pieces in this period are *Circles* and *Fantasia*. These show serial techniques and pre-compositional row forms. These reveal four basic processes from the original row form to transposed forms: retrograde, inversion, and retrograde inversion. *Circles* (1964) is an atonal piece with extreme ranges including extended techniques such as forearm clusters and glissandi inside the piano. *Fantasia* (1966) is also an atonal and pointillistic piece. In *Fantasia*, Tower includes frequent meter changes and extreme registers in the keyboard. Also, it has the extended technique of plucked strings inside of the piano.

Her second period (1977-present) includes less dissonant and pointillistic works. During this period, Tower wrote various kinds of keyboard works, including one waltz

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109 Wise.
110 Howard, 665.
111 Dees, 242.
(Red Garnet Waltz), two Piano Concertos (No. 1 & No.2), a two-piano piece (Stepping Stones), one solo organ piece (Ascent), one piano collection (No Longer Very Clear), and one teaching piece (Big Steps). Instead of creating a pre-compositional plan, she used what she calls an “organic” process when writing these works. She explained that this process involves, “the energy and shaping of a musical line, color, the exploration of musical space, and the balancing of compositional gestures.”

This second, more mature period, includes Red Garnet Waltz and Piano Concerto No. 1. Red Garnet Waltz (1977) was written for pianist Robert Helps and the C. F. Peters Waltz Project, per Helps’ request. Piano Concerto No. 1 (1985) pays homage to Beethoven and includes compositional ideas from his piano sonatas--Tempest, Waldstein, and Op.111. Jacquelyn Helin premiered this piece and later Ursula Oppens recorded it. During my personal interview with Tower she explained that she and Oppens have a close working relationship.

Tower dedicated her 1996 Piano Concerto No.2 - Rapids to Ursula Oppens. This 12-minute piece was commissioned by the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Music for their 100th Anniversary. Oppens premiered this piece on March 2, 1996 and in 2002 included it in a recording “The Centennial Commissions: Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Music.”

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112 Bonds, 24-25.
113 Humphrey, 1.
114 Interview with the author.
115 Humphrey, 1.
116 Grolman, 63.
117 Ibid., 68.
Tower, this music is like “a river that is moving fast and furiously.”118 Compared to Piano Concerto No. 1, Rapids places greater technical demands on the soloist.

Additional works from Tower’s second period include: Stepping Stones: A Ballet for Two Pianos (1995), Big Steps (2004), No Longer Very Clear (2005), and Ascent (1996) for organ. Stepping Stones: A Ballet was originally created for full orchestra. It was commissioned by choreographer Kathryn Posin for the Milwaukee Ballet in 1993.119 In 1995, Tower arranged this piece for two pianos.120

*Big Steps* (2004) was commissioned by Merkin Hall and pays homage to Debussy.121 I received the score—an unpublished manuscript--from the composer. It appears that I will be providing the first analysis of this work.


The second piece, Or like a...an Engine (1995), is derived from the 18-line, four stanza poem, No Longer Very Clear, by John Ashbery, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. In Or like a...an Engine, Tower evokes the image of a running engine. It is a rapid, motoric piano piece, a perpetual motion toccata. It is also dedicated to Ursula Oppens.

The third piece, Vast Antique Cubes, is described by Tower as, “a very large space that moved quite slowly from low to high and higher still. Within this reaching

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118 Joan Tower, Liner Notes from *Centennial Commissions; Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the UW-Madison School of Music*, Ursula Oppens, piano, UW-Madison Symphony Orchestra, conducted by David E. Becker, UW-Madison School of Music, 193156902-9, 2002, CD.

119 Grolman, 54.

120 Ibid., 35.

121 Interview with the author.

122 Grolman, 35.

123 Interview with the author.
upwards are suggestions of Debussy and Chopin--two composers whom I played frequently as a pianist.\textsuperscript{124} This piece also recalls Debussy’s prelude for piano, \textit{Voiles}.\textsuperscript{125}

\textit{Throbbing Still} is the final piece in the collection. It is another motoric piece that recalls Stravinsky.\textsuperscript{126} Tower wrote, “in the much more energetic and faster \textit{Throbbing Still}, the music of Stravinsky and the Latin Inca rhythms that I grew up with in South America continue to play a powerful role.”\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Vast Antique Cubes} and \textit{Throbbing Still} are dedicated to the pianist John Browning.\textsuperscript{128}

Cherry Rhodes premiered Tower’s \textit{Ascent} in 1996 at the National Convention of the American Guild of Organists in New York.\textsuperscript{129} This piece presents octatonic scales, virtuosic pedal playing, terraced dynamics, and sustained dissonant chords.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{125} La Bonne Feroza, “Pianist Tower Charms at Pleshakov Center,” \textit{The Times Union} (Nov. 21, 2000), B9.
\textsuperscript{127}“Program Note: Composer Note,” http://www.schirmer.com/default.aspx?TabId=2420&State_2874=2&workId_2874=34034; Internet; accessed 14 February 2009.
\textsuperscript{128} Grolman, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 95.
CHAPTER FOUR

TITLES AND ORIGINS OF TOWER’S SOLO KEYBOARD WORKS

In this chapter, I will further discuss the titles and origins of Tower’s solo keyboard compositions from 1964 when she began composing her first piano piece, *Circles*, through 2007. It will include her solo piano pieces, *Circles, Fantasia, Red Garnet Waltz, No Longer Very Clear*, and *Big Steps* as well as her organ piece, *Ascent*. My discussion will include all four parts of *No Longer Very Clear: Holding a Daisy, Or like a…an Engine, Vast Antique Cubes,* and *Throbbing Still*.

Because she wants titles of her works to be descriptive of the content of the music, Tower usually names her pieces after the compositions are complete.131 The basis for the information provided in this section is my personal discussion with Tower, as well as interviews she granted to other authors, including newspaper articles, books, and dissertations.

*Circles*

Tower’s first composition is a seven-minute solo keyboard piece titled *Circles*.132 This was written in partial fulfillment of her master’s degree program at Columbia University and it was published by the American Composers’ Alliance in 1964. When I asked Tower about the basis and origin for the title of *Circles*, she explained that she had not yet decided to title her pieces as descriptions of her compositions,133 so this title is not...
necessarily descriptive of the music content. In fact, she said that she could not remember why she named the piece *Circles*. In this piece, Tower follows a twelve-tone structure. It rotates around twelve-tone rows that sound just like the title *Circles* might suggest. I think, therefore, she may have used a simple, direct title for her first piece.

*Fantasia*

Tower’s second first period solo keyboard piece, *Fantasia*, is a ten-minute work. It was published by the American Composers’ Alliance in 1966. This piece was also part of her Master’s degree program. Tower said she chose this free-style title because it could be used to mean anything.

According to Christopher D. S. Field, from the 16th century to the 19th century, the form of music called *Fantasia* had stylistic traits including free, improvisatory characteristics and contrapuntal characteristics. Thus, *Fantasia* refers to an abstract idea or feeling, rather than a specific descriptive title as Tower would use in her later works. Although Tower uses a twelve-tone structure, she uses a free form using the title *Fantasia*.

*Red Garnet Waltz*

Tower’s third solo keyboard piece, *Red Garnet Waltz*, a three-minute work, was written in 1977 as a request from Robert Helps, a good friend. Helps and Robert Moran asked several of their friends to write waltzes. They combined these waltzes into a work that was published in 1978 by C. F. Peters Corporation entitled *Waltzes by 25*

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
137 Interview with the author.
Contemporary Composers.\textsuperscript{138} Tower described Helps as a very good pianist and composer. Tower explained the origin of the title:

*Red Garnet Waltz* is actually simple. My father was a geologist and a mining engineer. I wanted to dedicate a series of pieces to him through [names of] minerals and metals. So, I looked up in his books, minerals…the right mineral. Garnet is a very hardcore mineral. It has a chisel shape to it and they are small. I guess I thought of the piece as being kind of red as it’s very motivic, very angular.\textsuperscript{139}

So, the title of *Red Garnet Waltz* came from the characteristics of the stone itself.

Sophia Fuller says that *Red Garnet Waltz* describes “The shiny, hard-edged quality of the stone.”\textsuperscript{140} According to Mary Louis Humphrey’s writing, *Joan Tower*, the title *Red Garnet* expresses “Hard-edged qualities and the hard, fragmentable surfaces of garnets.”\textsuperscript{141} Also, *Red Garnet* is described as a combination of two different elements, a detailed structure of solid stones and sparkling notes.\textsuperscript{142}

Tower said that she could add the word “Waltz” as part of the title because “It is all about threes.”\textsuperscript{143} Humphrey called *Red Garnet Waltz*, “a compositional study of the number three.”\textsuperscript{144} Thus, *Red Garnet Waltz* expresses three elements: red as an expression of Tower’s feeling about the piece and a reference to its very percussive and angular effect; garnet as a tribute to her father; and waltz as an emphasis on the meter sequences of threes found throughout the piece.

\textsuperscript{139} Interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{140} Fuller, 312.
\textsuperscript{141} Humphrey, 3.
\textsuperscript{143} Interview with author.
\textsuperscript{144} Humphrey, 3.
No Longer Very Clear

Tower’s *No Longer Very Clear* is a piano collection made up of four pieces: *Or like a...an Engine*, *Holding a Daisy*, *Vast Antique Cubes*, and *Throbbing Still*. Each of the pieces of the collection will be discussed individually. These four pieces were written separately, but published as a group by the AMP (American Music Publishers) in 2005 as *No Longer Very Clear*.\(^{145}\) Pianists can play these pieces individually or all together. The title *No Longer Very Clear* is based on the poem of the same name by Pulitzer-prize winning poet John Ashbery.\(^{146}\) WNYC-FM asked her to write a piece on Ashbery’s poem for their 50\(^{th}\) anniversary. His poem includes of all these phrases: *Or like a...an engine*, *Holding a Daisy*, *Vast Antique Cubes*, and *Throbbing Still*. Tower said these titles described fantastic images within his poem.\(^{147}\)

The poem *No Longer Very Clear* has four stanzas comprised of eighteen lines and is contained within Ashbery’s collection of poems called *Can You Hear, Bird*.\(^{148}\) “His poem, a 4-stanza, 18-line reflection on the uneasy relationship between time, memory and both abstract and emotional associations was commissioned by the radio station WNYC-FM and given to a dozen composers.”\(^{149}\)

The full text of Ashbery’s *No Longer Very Clear* is as follows:

*No Longer Very Clear*

*It is true that I can no longer remember very well*

*The time when we first began to know each other*

*However, I do remember very well*


\(^{146}\) Wise.

\(^{147}\) Interview with the author.


The first time we met. You walked in sunlight,
Holding a Daisy. You said, “Children make unreliable witnesses.”

Now, so long after that time,
I keep the spirit of it Throbbing Still.
The ideas are still the same, and they expand
to fill vast, antique cubes.
My daughter was reading one just the other day.
She said, “How like pellucid statues, Daddy. Or like a... an engine.”

In this house of blues the cold creeps stealthily upon us.
I do not dare to do what I fantasize doing.
With time the blue congeals into roomlike purple
That takes the shape of alcoves, landings...
Everything is like something else,
I should have waited before I learned this.

Or like a…an Engine

Tower’s fourth solo keyboard work, Or like a…an Engine, is a three-minute long piece. Although it is one of the pieces that make up the collection entitled No Longer Very Clear, it was published first as an independent piece in 1994 by the Associated Music Publishers (AMP).\(^{150}\) It was also published in 1995 in American Contemporary Masters: A Collection of Works for Piano by AMP.\(^{151}\) This is once again a piece dedicated to Ursula Oppens.\(^{152}\) Of the piece Tower said, “There were fantastic images inside the poem. I saw the phrase, or like a…an engine. I thought, ‘this will be my title of my piece.’”\(^{153}\) Although she wrote this piece first, Tower eventually put Or like a... an Engine as the second piece in her collection, No Longer Very Clear.

\(^{150}\) Joan Tower, Or like a...an Engine (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1994).
\(^{152}\) Grolman, 98.
\(^{153}\) Interview with the author.
In the composer’s note, Tower wrote, “This is a motoric piece, somewhat like a virtuosic Chopin etude.” Or like a...an Engine creates an image of a continuously pounding engine and demands advanced piano technique.

**Holding a Daisy**

Tower’s fifth solo keyboard piece, *Holding a Daisy*, a four-minute work, is the third piece written during her second period. *Holding a Daisy* was written in 1996 and published in 2005 by AMP. According to Tower *Holding a Daisy* started from a request from Sarah Rothenberg of the Da Camera Society of Music. Rothenberg asked Tower to write a piano piece for her recital in New York. Tower said,

Well, I’ll make a companion piece to *Or like a...an Engine*...Since I had this poem [No Longer Very Clear], I could take the words right out of the poem. It was an unusually easy thing to have because you usually have to think about a title without any help. Generally, I wrote the pieces and then I picked the titles. They are pretty reflective except *Holding a Daisy* is not. That’s a more subtle title. Actually, what it means is the daisy is a very pretty, nice flower. If you look at it really, really closely like Georgia O’Keefe did with her painting, it suddenly becomes something a little more threatening, a little more ominous. So that’s the idea of *Holding a Daisy*. A daisy is not as simple as it looks.

Greg Sandow, a music critic, described *Holding a Daisy* as “simple chords grow into something big and strong; the ending, calm again, sounds more like a pause than a conclusion.” In *Holding a Daisy* Tower starts with a quiet introduction and then unexpectedly moves into stormy sounding music. The ending returns once again to quietness.

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154 Grolman, 98.
156 Interview with the author.
157 Ibid.
**Vast Antique Cubes**

Tower’s sixth solo keyboard work, *Vast Antique Cubes*, about three minutes in length, was published in 2005 by AMP. According to one of *The New York Times* music critics, Anne Midgette, *Vast Antique Cubes* is a relaxed piece that has individual sound overtones. Tower said that Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania called and asked her to write a piano piece for their piano series. Tower had previously met John Browning at the New York Philharmonic and thought of him as an excellent performer. Although Browning did not usually play new music, he agreed to play this new piece at Tower’s personal request. John Browning premiered the work on September 16, 2000. This piece occupies a very large space on the keyboard by using widely spaced registers. Tower called *Vast Antique Cubes* “widespread piano spaces.”

**Throbbing Still**

Tower’s seventh solo piano piece, *Throbbing Still*, is a seven minute work, her fifth written during her second period. It was written in 2000 as another commissioned piece for John Browning who premiered the work on September 16, 2000, at Franklin and Marshall College. It was published in 2005 by AMP. *Throbbing Still* shows unexpected accents and percussive sounds to express “throbbing.” It also uses contrasting tempo changes, distinctive Stravinsky-style repeated chords, and perpetual rhythms reminiscent of Bartok. Tower uses various musical materials or elements during the work, yet energy is maintained from the beginning to the end.

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160 Interview with the author.
161 Grolman, 98-99.
163 Interview with the author.
**Big Steps**

Tower’s eighth solo keyboard work, *Big Steps*, is her sixth solo piano work written during her second period. Written in 2004, it is not published. I felt very honored when Tower sent me a copy of this piece. She explained,

I have a small work called *Big Steps* that I wrote for children to play that was performed at Merkin Hall by a 14-year-old as part of a series of new works for children produced by Karen Chester, Merkin Hall’s director. *Big Steps* pays homage to Debussy and particularly to his *Pas Sur La Neige* (Steps in the Snow)—a piece I often played and still love.

She said, “I was trying to get the young pianist to be aware of the range of the piano. So, those were the *Big Steps*.” In *Big Steps*, the pitch intervals are presented as wide leaps. Tower uses whole tones in homage to Debussy.

**Ascent**

Tower’s first and only solo organ piece, *Ascent*, a seven-minute work, was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists and published in 1996. Tower dedicated this piece to Cherry Rhodes who was chosen by the AGO Convention to premier the work. Rhodes premiered this piece at the American Guild of Organists National Convention in New York City on July 8, 1996. In her program notes Tower wrote, “The title *Ascent* is quite direct in its description of the upward-moving scales in the piece, which is the central thematic action.”

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164 Ibid.
165 E-mail from Joan Tower, 6/6/2006.
166 Interview with the author.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
Conclusion

The titles of Tower’s solo keyboard works have many different origins. *Circles* and *Fantasia*, Tower’s first period compositions, have general titles. Later, during her second period, Tower created evocative titles—*Red Garnet Waltz, Or like a...an Engine, Holding a Daisy, Vast Antique Cubes, Throbbing Still, No Longer Very Clear, Big Steps*, and *Ascent*. *Red Garnet Waltz* was dedicated to her father, a mining engineer. *Big Steps* recalls Debussy’s *Pas Sur La Neige*. *No Longer Very Clear* is based on a poem of the same name by John Ashbery. The titles of the four pieces of *No Longer Very Clear*: *Holding a Daisy, Or like a...an Engine, Vast Antique Cubes*, and *Throbbing Still* are phrases within this poem. *Ascent* relates directly to the creation of ascending scales. Tower’s titles are like a compressed program note; they hint at the music that will follow.
CHAPTER FIVE
AN ANALYSIS OF TOWER’S SOLO KEYBOARD WORKS

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the solo keyboard music of Joan Tower. I will use the conventional categories of style analysis for the purpose of describing the compositional materials that Tower uses. These analyses hopefully will benefit both the scholar and the performer of Tower’s music. I will discuss the characteristics of these works: Circles, Fantasia, Red Garnet Waltz, Or like a...an Engine, Holding a Daisy, Vast Antique Cubes, Throbbing Still, and Ascent.

Tower’s solo keyboard music may be organized into two primary compositional periods: music written before 1974 and music written after that date. In her first period, her serial period, I will discuss Tower’s use of contemporary keyboard techniques including tone clusters, glissandi, plucking strings, muted strings, and her use of the damper and the sostenuto pedals. In her second period, I will discuss Tower’s use of one-movement structures, her organic process of writing, her use of motivic development, and the influences that other composers had on Tower. I will also discuss her use of scales, harmony, and rhythm. In addition, I will provide some performance suggestions.
Tower’s First Period Compositions

Tower’s solo keyboard works written before 1974 are *Circles* and *Fantasia.* These works are marked by the use of serial techniques and complex structures. Tower created thick textures, many dissonances; she wrote in extreme registers with frequent meter changes and pointillistic writing. According to Tower, “I was involved with serial music at that time. This was in the 60s and 70s, early 70s. I was playing a lot of difficult music at that time like Babbitt, Wolpe, Wuorinen. It is all incredibly challenging music.”

Contemporary Keyboard Techniques

Tower employed various contemporary keyboard techniques during her first period, including: tone clusters produced by the arm and hand, glissandi, plucked strings, muted strings, and the special use of the sostenuto pedal. In addition to these techniques various timbres are produced by using the fingernails and fingertips directly on the strings.

Tone Clusters

The tone cluster, a dissonant group of closely-spaced notes played at the same time, is one of the most popular non-traditional devices in modern piano music. The tone cluster sometimes calls for the use of forearms to depress the keys. There are white tone clusters, black tone clusters, and chromatic tone clusters. Tower used white tone clusters in *Circles.*

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203 Interview with the author.
204 Harrel, 62.
Ex. 1: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 15-16, mm. 28-30, mm. 45-48, mm. 70-77, mm. 82-85, mm. 91-97

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.

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Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
Glissandi

One way composers obtain different timbres on the piano is by playing string glissandi inside the instrument. Glissandi can usually be played by using the fingertips across the strings. In measure 15 of *Circles* (Ex. 2), Tower wrote, “glissando inside piano from last or highest metal partition to end of strings.”205 Later, Tower inserts another glissando by calling for stroking the strings upward from the bottom strings to the metal partition. It starts from A to C in the 85th measure of *Circles* (Ex. 3).206

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205 *Circles* page 2, measure 15, American Composer’s Alliance.
206 Ibid., page 8, measure 85.
Plucked Strings

*Fantasia* uses plucked strings with fingernails at measure 171 (Ex. 4).²⁰⁷ George Crumb calls for scraped strings on the metal windings by using a fingernail as in his *Makrokosmos II*.²⁰⁸ According to Tower, “George Crumb uses fingernail a lot. But generally composers are not going inside of the piano too much because it ruins the

²⁰⁷ *Fantasia*, page 14, measure 171, American Composer’s Alliance.
²⁰⁸ Harrel, 57.
piano. I played a lot inside of the piano. But it is a hard work."\textsuperscript{209} According to Doris Harrel, plucked strings sound different depending on where players pluck the string. For example, strings plucked at their midpoint sound different from strings plucked close to the bridge.\textsuperscript{210}

Ex. 4: Tower, \textit{Fantasia}, mm. 169-171

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example4}
\caption{Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Muted Strings}

Tower also used muted strings inside the piano (Ex. 5). Tower described the process: “One hand strikes the key. The other presses the strings inside the piano of that note near the pins.”\textsuperscript{211} On the score, she indicates a special mark (+) on the notes in order to designate the muted strings. This technique is challenging because both hands are in use at the same time. While one hand strikes the key, the other hand mutes the string.\textsuperscript{212}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Interview with the author.
\item Harrel, 57.
\item \textit{Fantasia}, page 3, measure 14, American Composer’s Alliance.
\item Harrel, 59.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Ex. 5: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 14-15, mm. 48-54, mm. 169-171

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
Pedals

In her first period works, *Circles* and *Fantasia*, Tower used two different kinds of pedals—damper pedals and sostenuto pedals. She did not indicate the use of the una corda pedal in these pieces.

**Damper Pedal**

Tower often uses the damper pedal to sustain sound in order to mix timbres and sonorities. She uses the damper pedal to mix timbres and sonorities in *Circles*, m. 2 (Ex. 6). She layers the notes with ties in mm. 2-3, *Circles*. After releasing the damper pedal in m. 3, the tremolo is left. This clear mark helps the pianist to bring out the middle voice, the two-note tremolo (Ex. 6 and 7). Another example is in mm. 12-13, *Circles* (Ex. 7).

Ex. 6: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 1-3

![Ex. 6: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 1-3](used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.)

Ex. 7: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 11-14

![Ex. 7: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 11-14](used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.)
Tower uses “open dampers” in *Circles*, mm. 96-97 (Ex. 8) to get all the strings to vibrate freely. The net result is a dramatic, orchestral effect.

Ex. 8: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 96-97

![Ex. 8: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 96-97](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

Tower uses the damper pedal on the plucked strings in *Fantasia*, m. 158 (Ex. 9). Although the same chord (A-C) is played twice in m. 158, the timbre is different each time. The first chord is played at the keyboard; the second is sounded by plucking the strings inside the piano. The use of the damper pedal on the second chord creates a full sound.

Ex. 9: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 156-158

![Ex. 9: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 156-158](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower uses the damper pedal on the muted keys in *Fantasia*, m. 14 (Ex. 10). The damper pedal helps to clarify the pitches (Bb in the right hand; B in the left hand). Also, she uses the damper pedal on the muted keys in *Fantasia*, mm. 48-49. The top note, Bb, is emphasized by the damper pedal (Ex. 11).

Ex. 10: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 14-15

![Ex. 10: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 14-15](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

Ex. 11: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 48-50

![Ex. 11: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 48-50](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

Tower employs the damper pedal to strengthen the percussive sound in *Fantasia*, m. 9 (Ex. 12). The chord marked forte results in a stronger sound by using the damper pedal.
Sostenuto Pedal

The sostenuto pedal became available to pianists and composers in 1844. The firm of Boisselot and Sons of Marseilles introduced the pedal at the Paris Exhibition that year. The sostenuto pedal is often used with chords, single pitches, and silent-depressed clusters. When pianists use the sostenuto pedal, the pedal holds the dampers off the strings for those keys that are depressed at the time the pedal is activated. After the pedal is depressed the pianist can continue to play other notes that are damped in the usual way. Tower continued to use the sostenuto pedal in her later compositions.

Tower uses the sostenuto pedal with a single pitch in Fantasia, mm. 1-2 (Ex. 13).

Ex. 12: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 8-10

Ex. 13: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 1-3

Harrel, 33.
Summary of Contemporary Keyboard Techniques in *Circles* and *Fantasia*

In *Circles* and *Fantasia*, Tower employed modern keyboard techniques, such as tone clusters, glissandi, plucked strings, muted strings, and the special use of the sostenuto pedal. She used white-key tone clusters and glissandi inside the piano in *Circles*. The glissandi move in two different directions. The first is from the highest metal partition to the end of the strings. The other is from the bottom of the strings to the metal partition. In *Fantasia*, Tower employs plucked strings using fingernails as well as muted strings with a special mark (+) on the score. In *Fantasia* she calls for the use of the both the damper and sostenuto pedals; in *Circles* she requires only the damper pedal. The damper pedal helps to create long, intense and percussive sounds on the plucked strings, the muted strings, and during the glissandi. Finally, these two pieces will help performers understand modern piano techniques.

**Twelve-tone Row Forms**

Tower composed *Circles* and *Fantasia* based on pre-compositional maps using twelve-tone row forms. In this process there is a concentration or focus on pitch. She said, “Pitch content seems to be the fundamental aspect of how a piece ‘goes’ and how a piece changes. And how significant those changes are depends on how the content changes, which in turn depends on the content itself.”²¹⁴ Besides pitch, she was also concerned with rhythm, register, texture, and spacing during her first period.²¹⁵

*Circles*

*Circles* can be divided into five sections based on tempo changes.

²¹⁴ Grolman, 35-36.
²¹⁵ Bonds, 19.
Figure 1. The five sections in *Circles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tempo</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tempo I</strong></td>
<td>mm. 1-27</td>
<td>Eighth note=108-120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poco Meno Mosso</strong></td>
<td>mm. 28-51</td>
<td>Quarter note=44-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Piu Mosso</strong></td>
<td>mm. 52-58</td>
<td>Quarter note=70-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tempo I</strong></td>
<td>mm. 59-85</td>
<td>Eighth note=108-120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meno Mosso</strong></td>
<td>mm. 86-97</td>
<td>Quarter note=35-40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Twelve-tone Row Matrix**

*Circles* is based on a twelve-tone row as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Twelve-tone matrix of Tower’s *Circles*

In the five sections in Figure 1 above, Tower starts with P5 at the opening of each section except the last section. *Circles* starts with the first twelve-tone row, P5: F, F#, Ab, A, G, Eb, E, D, C, B, Bb, Db in mm. 1-3. And then she uses R5: Db, Bb, B, C, D, E, Eb, G, A, Ab, F#, F in mm. 4-5. She also uses a fragment of P5 (E, Eb, D, C, B) in m. 7.
(Ex. 14). Interestingly, by having R5 follow immediately after P5, a mirror image is created.

Ex. 14: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 1-9

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower uses P5 in *Circles*, m. 16, R5 in m. 19, and I11 in m. 20. Between m. 19 and m. 20, Tower connects R5 and I11 with a tremolo accompaniment (Ex. 15).

Ex. 15: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 15-22

Ex. 15: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 15-22

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.

The second section from m. 28 to m. 30 uses P5, although Tower does not include the F#.

Ex. 16: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 28-30

Ex. 16: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 28-30

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
As noted above, the third section from m. 52 to m. 58 also uses P5 (starting note, A).

Ex. 17: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 52-58

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
Finally, the fourth section from m. 59 to m. 61 also uses P5. Interestingly, the fifth and final section does not use a strict twelve-tone row. By using P5 to start four of the five sections of the piece, Towers seems to create a “circular” effect, as I mentioned in chapter four. Rather than advancing through the rows Tower returns repeatedly to P5 to start each section.

Ex. 18: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 59-61

![Ex. 18: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 59-61](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

**Fantasia**

Tower’s *Fantasia* can be divided into six sections based on tempo. The tempo changes are indicated with precise metronome markings. Unlike *Circles* where Tower returns to the same row to begin four of the five sections, in *Fantasia* Tower employs different twelve-tone rows in each section.

Figure 3. The six sections in *Fantasia*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>mm. 1-47 Eighth note=100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>mm. 48-87 Eighth note=72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>mm. 88-137 Eighth note=102-112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>mm. 138-157 Eighth note=120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>mm. 158-167 Eighth note=92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>mm. 168-171 Eighth note=80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Twelve-tone Matrix

Here are the twelve-tone matrixes Tower uses in *Fantasia*:

**Figure 4. Tower, *Fantasia*, Twelve-tone matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I₁</th>
<th>I₂</th>
<th>I₃</th>
<th>I₄</th>
<th>I₅</th>
<th>I₆</th>
<th>I₇</th>
<th>I₈</th>
<th>I₉</th>
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<th>I₁₁</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P₁</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C#</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Eb</td>
<td>Gb</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₂</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gb</td>
<td>Ab</td>
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<td>C#</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>P₄</td>
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<td>Gb</td>
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<td>Ab</td>
<td>Bb</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Eb</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P₅</td>
<td>Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ab</td>
<td>Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>C#</td>
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<tr>
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<td>P₇</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>Gb</td>
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<td>Ab</td>
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<td>P₈</td>
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<td>C#</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gb</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Ab</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P₁₁</th>
<th>P₁₀</th>
<th>P₉</th>
<th>P₈</th>
<th>P₇</th>
<th>P₆</th>
<th>P₅</th>
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<td>R₅</td>
<td>R₄</td>
<td>R₃</td>
<td>R₂</td>
<td>R₁</td>
<td>R₀</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

60
The first section starts with P7 in mm. 1-2. P7 appears again in mm. 8-9.

Ex. 19: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 1-10

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
She utilizes P10 in mm. 10-12, P11 in mm. 14-15, and R11 in mm. 16-17.

Ex. 20: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 8-17

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower uses P7 in m. 22, P4 in m. 23, and P5 in m. 25.

Ex. 21: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 22-25

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower employs RI0 in m. 34. Just as she uses P11 and R11 in mm. 16-17, Tower utilizes P11 and R11 in mm. 35-37. She also uses twelve tones vertically within chords. These two rows are not in exact order, but she makes use of these two rows in mm. 35-37.

Ex. 22: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 34-39

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower utilizes R11 in m. 42, and P6 in m. 45. The first chord of six notes in m. 45 is arranged in a row, however, the second chord is freely arranged. She uses RI10 and RI 11 in mm. 46-47.

Ex. 23: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 40-47

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
The second section consists of mm. 48-87. Tower uses P8 in mm. 53-54. She employs a massive first chord that does not show the row clearly; however, the rest of the notes in the row are in the massive chord in m. 54.

Ex. 24: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 51-54

![Ex. 24: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 51-54](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

The third section is from mm. 88-137. Tower makes use of P11 in mm. 88-89. She uses R7 from mm. 93-94, with the exception of pitch B, and I7 in mm. 108-111. She employs P2 in mm. 114-115, and I6 in mm. 120-122.

Ex. 25: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 87-97, 107-114, 119-124

![Ex. 25: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 87-97, 107-114, 119-124](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower uses I5 in m. 122, P5 in m. 123, and P6 in m. 128.

Ex. 26: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 122-128
Tower employs P5 in mm. 129-130 and R15 in mm. 131-132.

Ex. 27: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 129-132

![Image of Tower, Fantasia, mm. 129-132](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

Tower utilizes R17 in mm. 133-134.

Ex. 28: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 133-136

![Image of Tower, Fantasia, mm. 133-136](image)

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
The fourth section is from mm. 138-157. She starts with RI4 in mm. 138-139 and RI7 in mm. 141-142.

Ex. 29: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 137-142

Tower employs I6 in mm. 144-145. She uses P9 in mm. 148-151, and P10 in mm. 151-152.

Ex. 30: Tower, Fantasia, mm. 143-155

Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.
Tower utilizes P9 in mm. 154-155 and P10 in m. 156.

Ex. 31: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 152-158
The fifth section starts with R1 in mm. 158-159 and R9 in mm. 166-167.

Ex. 32: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 156-161, mm. 166-167

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
The sixth section is in mm. 169-172. R7 starts from B, in mm. 169-170.

Ex. 33: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 169-172

Summary of Twelve-tone Forms in *Circles* and *Fantasia*

*Circles* and *Fantasia* are based on twelve-tone row forms. *Circles* can be divided into five sections indicated by the tempo changes. Tower starts P5 in the first, second, third, and fourth sections. She does not use P5 in the last section. Similar to *Circles*, *Fantasia* can be divided into six sections marked by the tempo changes. All six sections alternate between fast and slow tempos. The first section is started by P7. Subsequently, many twelve-tone rows are used, such as P4, 5, 6, 10, 11, R11, RI0, 1, 10, 11. P8 is found in the middle of the second section. The third section reveals the use of P11, R7, I7, P2, I6. The fourth section uses R14, R17, I6, P9, P10. The fifth section uses R1, R9; the last section, R7. *Fantasia* incorporates many twelve-tone row forms and is started...
by a different row in each section. Because of the notational and metric complexity, both of these works are very challenging to perform. These works contain harsh, stark sounds. Thus, great demands are placed on the audience as well as the performer.

**Rhythm**

In both *Circles* and *Fantasia*, Tower creatively uses diverse rhythms to great effect. A favorite device she includes is “special ratio rhythms” with pointillistic notes. She uses the “special ratio rhythms” in thirty-second note passages with 11:8, 9:8, and 7:8. The moving rhythms make *Circles* more active. Examples are in *Circles*, m. 5, m. 10, m. 15, m. 22, m. 38, mm. 42-43, m. 45, m. 53, m. 62, and m. 81.

Ex. 34: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 4-10, 15, 20-22, 37-48, 52-53, 62, 80-81

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower uses tremolo rhythms to create a dramatic effect in sections of *Circles* such as in mm. 31-39. All of the tremolo rhythms have a crescendo effect. The dissonance tremolos in m. 36, m. 39 make *Circles* more intense.

Ex. 35: Tower, *Circles*, mm. 31-39

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*
Tower continuously changes meters, which demands a strong rhythmic sense on the part of the performers. For example, she employs six different meters (4/4, 3/8, 3/4, 7/16, 3/8, 5/16) in *Fantasia*, mm. 59-65.

Ex. 36: Tower, *Fantasia*, mm. 59-65

*Used by permission, American Composers Alliance. See acknowledgements.*

**Conclusion**

In *Circles* and *Fantasia*, Tower uses twelve-tone rows using P, I, R, and RI. *Circles* can be divided into five sections and *Fantasia* can be divided into six sections based on tempo. The sections of both works alternate between fast and slow tempos. Tower provides exact metronome markings in each section. Each section of *Circles* starts with a P5, except for the last section. Each section of *Fantasia* uses various twelve-tone rows. *Circles* and *Fantasia* both use “special ratio rhythms” with pointillistic notes. Tower employs complex rhythms in the extreme registers of the piano as well as frequent meter changes.
TOWER’S SECOND PERIOD COMPOSITIONS


Style

Typically, Tower presents her melodic ideas in the opening measures, then the original motives build and grow into the entire piece. According to Tower, “Form is generated by the material. I don’t plan structure, harmonic progression, etc., because it may not work for the piece. My strongest forms are ones that are really generated by the material. I don’t like forcing materials into a mold.”216

One-movement Structure

Tower’s favorite structure is a one-movement form. Because the break between movements sometimes is too large, Tower prefers one-movement forms that create forward motion without pause.217 Tower’s works usually are long, one-movement works with several themes. However, she did create two multi-movement works, No Longer Very Clear: A Suite for Piano and A Gift for Wind Quartet and Piano (2008). No Longer Very Clear is comprised of four pieces composed between 1994 and 2000.218 She wrote one-movement structures for the solo keyboard pieces, Red Garnet Waltz, Ascent, and Big Steps.

216 Interview with the author.
217 Grolman, 34.
218 Ibid., 35.
**Organic Process**

Tower uses what she calls an “organic process” when she composes. She thinks about the kind of instrument for which she is writing and length of the piece she has in mind (small, medium, or large).\(^\text{219}\) The organic process is composing without any pre-compositional plan.\(^\text{220}\) Tower starts with small motives such as an author might do with characters in a novel. As characters in a novel develop through interaction with each other, she develops the motives and “listens” to how they relate to each other. She says,

> It is like writing a novel. You start with a character. The person works in a bank...he is kind of humorless. He is old and unhappy. Then, you start with that; that’s the person. Then, that person starts to interact with some beautiful woman walking in the bank, a very together and ambitious woman. Then, these two start to affect each other. So this humorless boring person starts to get affected by this woman and starts to change and starts to, maybe, open up. Then, some other person comes into the picture. Then, there is that interaction.\(^\text{221}\)

Listening to the music is the key. In music it is hard to tell how the musical “characters” affect each other. She explained,

> It is a hard thing to map out because you are not sure from moment to moment how they are going to affect each other. It is the same thing with music. You have to be a very good listener. Listen very carefully to your characters--who they are, what they are they doing in relationship to each other, and for how long.\(^\text{222}\)

Tower said the difference between a novel and music is time. For her, time in music is very important. Unlike the novel, music does not have any verbal language, but a “feeling” language. She explained,

> Unlike the novel, time plays a much bigger role in music. It does play a role in the novel, but, to me, not quite as big of a role as it does in music because in music you don’t have meaning, you have a feeling, a pure aural landscape which...

\(^\text{219}\) Interview with the author.
\(^\text{220}\) Bonds, 25.
\(^\text{221}\) Interview with the author.
\(^\text{222}\) Ibid.
has no particular meaning. Whereas in a novel, you have lots of meanings: symbol, representation…  

Tower follows an intuitive compositional plan in the balance and details of small motives. She believes this organic process is natural for her. She explained, “The writing-a-novel idea, to me, is the closest analogy to writing a piece. That’s why it is organic. That’s why I don’t like to plan too far ahead because it’s in the continuity and details as to how this thing is going to unfold.”

**Motivic Development**

Tower prefers to start with small motives in her compositions. In composing music, several elements--rhythm, motive, tempo--function together. According to Tower, “Rhythm and motives were the motivating factors of the work, most noticeably in shifts of tempo and motivic interactions.” She was influenced by Beethoven in her use of motivic development. Tower said,

Why I adored Beethoven is that he was about what I call motivated architecture. The power of his music is in how the strong profile of ideas are placed in absorbing sure-footed pacing of a narrative that takes unexpected risks that turns the action upside down. He had a sense of architecture that is motivated; it is so strong. It is concerned very much about pacing and rhythm, multiple rhythms.

Beethoven also influenced Tower in her second period compositions regarding ‘balancing.’ She follows Beethoven’s formal concepts of action and reaction in her compositions. Tower creates, for example, a “balancing forward action,” which is holding a note and repeating chords in octaves in a lower register. And a counter-balancing of up and down flows in another register with a different tempo.”

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223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 Briscoe, 297.
226 Interview with the author.
227 Crawford, 17.
Beethoven’s piano sonatas influenced how Tower creates counter-balanced musical gestures and how the structures keep the balance.\textsuperscript{228} Tower’s \textit{Piano Concerto No. 1} (1985) is a strong example of Beethoven’s influence, which includes the motives of Beethoven’s piano sonatas, \textit{Tempest}, \textit{Waldstein}, and \textit{Op.111}.\textsuperscript{229}

\textbf{Influence from Other Composers}

As a pianist, a teacher, and an audience member, Tower came in contact with many different composers’ works. Especially, she was influenced by Stravinsky, Messiaen, Bartok, Bach, Chopin, and Debussy.

\textbf{Stravinsky}

Tower’s dissonant repeated chords and vital rhythmic activity show the influence of Stravinsky.\textsuperscript{230} In an interview with Nancy E. Leckie Bonds, Tower explained the influence, “\textit{Rite of Spring}…near the beginning where the strings go ba-ba-ba-ba in the E+/eb chord. That is something that has been distributed throughout some of my pieces, that idea.”\textsuperscript{231} Stravinsky’s influence appears in Tower’s \textit{Throbbing Still}. She uses sharp accents on irregular beats in mm. 225-226.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Humphrey, 3.
\textsuperscript{230} Neuls-Bates, 354.
\textsuperscript{231} Bonds, 197.
Ex. 37: Stravinsky, Opening of “Danse des adolescents,” from *The Rite of Spring*, mm. 1-7

Ex. 38: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 224-228

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**Messiaen**

Tower’s music is also influenced by Messiaen, who used different rhythmic patterns involving long-held notes. Tower follows Messiaen’s concept of “holding a note
In her piano music Tower sustains notes for a long time in *Vast Antique Cubes*, m. 1. (Ex.39)

Ex. 39: Tower, *Vast Antique Cubes*, mm. 1-5

![Musical notation for Ex. 39](image)

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**Bartok**

There are measures in *Throbbing Still* where the repeated rhythms recall characteristics from the last movement of Bartok’s *Contrasts*. Tower explained, “Do you know that this scale and rhythm are in Bartok’s *Contrasts*? I used this idea frequently. You can find this idea very easily in my pieces.” Tower used Bartok’s motives as repeated rhythms in *Throbbing Still*; mm. 53-55, mm. 238-250, and mm. 252-256.

Ex. 40: Bartok, a motive of *Contrasts*

![Musical notation for Ex. 40](image)

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232 Crawford, 19.
233 Interview with the author.
Ex. 41: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 52-55, mm. 241-255

Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.
Bach

According to Tower, the motoric rhythms in her music are influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach, specifically Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In my personal interview, Tower said, “There is some Bach in *Or like a...an Engine*.”234 Tower demonstrated the excerpts of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, C minor Prelude for me during the interview.

Ex. 42: Bach, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, C minor Prelude, mm. 1-3

Ex. 43: Tower, *Or like a...an Engine*, mm. 55-58

Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.

Chopin

Tower’s music, *Or like a...an Engine* also was influenced by Chopin. During my personal interview Tower stated, “There is only one part of the piece, *Or like a...an Engine* that could be called like Chopin, just the ending…it is the tense idea from the C minor two hands up and down in Chopin’s *Etude Op.25*, No.12.”235

234 Ibid.
235 Ibid.
Debussy

Tower was also influenced by Debussy’s harmonic style and his use of seventh and ninth chords. In *Vast Antique Cubes*, dominant seventh chords appear in mm. 21-22. She employs D7, C9, D7, and Eb7 in mm. 21-22. *Vast Antique Cubes*, also uses dominant ninth chords, E9, F9, and major seventh on A in m. 24.
Form

While structure and organization are important to Tower, the forms she chooses to use are not the typical, classical formal structures.

*Red Garnet Waltz*

*Red Garnet Waltz*, does not follow ABA, the traditional waltz form. Rather, *Red Garnet Waltz* can be divided into three parts, ABC.

Figure. 5. Form of *Red Garnet Waltz*

- Section A: mm. 1-26
- Section B: mm. 27-62
- Section C: mm. 63-73

All three sections start in 3/4, the traditional waltz meter. Tower then shifts from 3/4 to 3/8 in order to change the “beat” of the section. Using two different meters, 3/4 and 3/8, she creates contrasts of temperament and mood.

All three sections employ two different ideas: a slow, sustained passage in 3/4 and rapid, rhythmical passages. Section A (mm. 1-26) starts in 3/4. There are consistent alternations between static passages (3/4) and rhythmical passages (3/8). Tower inserts 5/8 in m. 17 and m. 19 for active rhythmic sections.

Tower enjoys the conflict between consonance and dissonance in *Red Garnet Waltz*. She portrays the two different elements of the mineral garnet—hard-edged and sparkling. A common feature of the writing is the use of dissonances on long-held notes.
Section B (mm. 27-62) starts in 3/4 and moves to 3/8. Like section A, Tower introduces 3/4 in the first six measures in mm. 27-32. This writing is very gentle and atmospheric. The 3/8 section’s notable features include tone clusters, fragmentation of musical gestures, and an explosive nature. The dissonances express the characteristic of the solid stone of garnet.
Ex. 47: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 25-39

*Used by Permission, C. F. Peters Corporation. See Acknowledgements.*
Ex. 48: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 40-49

Section C (mm. 63-73) begins and ends in 3/4 meter. Tower employs two different ideas: long sustained notes and active rhythms, used in mm. 63-64. The final eleven measures (mm. 62-73) are primarily soft projecting a reflective character with the exception of one explosive outburst.

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No Longer Very Clear

_Holding a Daisy_

_Holding a Daisy_ can be divided into three parts, those parts determined by rhythmic motives.

**Figure 6. Form of Holding a Daisy**

- Section A (mm. 1-17)
- Section B (mm. 18-36)
- Section C (mm. 37-58)
Tower creates stark contrasts in these three sections. The beginning is very calm and mysterious, gradually evolving into a more active motion. To produce this effect, Tower employs tempo, meter, dynamic, and texture changes.

Ex. 50: Tower, *Holding a Daisy*, mm. 1-4

Section B is noted for its plethora of musical ideas. There is a general and gradual increase of sound throughout this section. There is a palpable feeling of frenzied excitement and drama throughout most of the final section of the work, although it ends as it began, very quietly.

In section C, the climax of the piece is reached. Without loss of continuity, the tempo shifts to change the overall feeling.
Or like a...an Engine

_Or like a...an Engine_ is a through-composed work. Tower uses continuous toccata-like, exciting, dramatic, and continuously repeated ostinato figures—all filled with nervous energy. Although the work begins with no meter, several different meters are used throughout the work. _Or like a...an Engine_ has two main characteristics: arpeggiated figuration without time signature, and repeated material with either changing meters or without time signatures.
Ex. 52: Tower, *Or like a...an Engine*, mm. 1-5

*The sixteenth note remains constant unless a triplet is indicated.*

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Throughout this piece, Tower uses a continuous line with a sinusoidal variation in scale to evoke the working of an engine. Repeated rhythms with frequent meter changes mirror the predictability of an engine without resulting in monotony for the listener. Much of the time, these musical effects seem to produce a non-stop locomotive motion.

Vast Antique Cubes

*Vast Antique Cubes* is the shortest piece of the set, just 33 measures. This music, especially the introduction, moves at a painfully slow, glacial pace. The strongest dynamic marking in the work is *mf*. Like Debussy, Tower creates her own musical language, using her sonorities and the spacing of them to create an ethereal mood.

Ex. 53: Tower, *Vast Antique Cubes*, mm. 1-5

![Ex. 53: Tower, Vast Antique Cubes, mm. 1-5](Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.)

Throbbing Still

*Throbbing Still* is a long, dramatic, and climactic ending to *No Longer Very Clear*. This is a complex tour-de-force. In this work Tower uses melodic and rhythmic gestures to great effect. These include singing, lyrical writing in contrast with virtuosic and brilliant passagework. She creates diverse characterizations that can be described as shimmering, pointillistic, suspenseful, and hammer-like.

Specifically, Tower uses a startling, unsettling percussive effect in upbeat rhythms and accents which then reverberates throughout the piece to produce the throbbing effect.
of the title. She includes articulated figures and different textures that explore the full
gamut of the keyboard, and great dynamic contrasts.

Ex. 54: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 1-5

![Ex. 54: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 1-5](image)

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Measures 6-14 are just one example in the piece of the shimmering effect. Mm. 20-22 depicts the pointillistic angularity that Tower favors in this work. The suspenseful quality in *Throbbing Still* is shown in mm. 40-43. The section that begins in m. 57 depicts the over-caffeinated, edgy character in this piece. The hammer-like effects that Tower loves to use in this work can be found in mm. 224-227.

Ex. 55: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 6-9

![Ex. 55: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 6-9](image)

*Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.*
Ex. 56: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 20-22

* Long enough hold for melody in next measures to be heard at $p$.

*Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.*

Ex. 57: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 39-43

*Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.*
In summary, *Throbbing Still* is an excellent example of Tower’s organic compositional approach. This piece seems to evolve without an apparent formal approach to structure. This repetitive, fast rhythmic style is one of Tower’s primary characteristics and demands an excited attentiveness. *Throbbing Still* is a most effective work.
Big Steps

Immediately under the printed title of *Big Steps* Tower writes “Homage to Debussy.” The opening 23 measures of this piece that are based on a whole-tone scale indeed show the influence of this important impressionist composer. Tower wrote this piece—a teaching piece for a young pianist—to highlight the pitch names of the whole steps C, D, E.

Ex. 60: Tower, *Big Steps*, mm. 1-24

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236 This is the first version of *Big Steps*. It is currently being revised and is not yet available from a publisher.
The second section begins from m. 32 and it is dominated by the usage of the octatonic scale. The climax of this work occurs here.

Ex. 61: Tower, *Big Steps*, mm. 31-42
The short, concluding section is noted for its calm dimension and presence of the chromatic scale. (mm. 46-57).

Ex. 62: Tower, *Big Steps*, mm. 43-57

*Big Steps* is not a difficult piece to perform, but it does require a mastery of touch, subtlety, and nuance.
Ascent

In Ascent, Tower’s only piece for pipe organ, the composer displays a remarkable variety of compositional devices and color effects. These include dramatic dynamic changes, thin textures juxtaposed with massive chordal passages, virtuosic manual and pedal writing, complicated rhythms, and very detailed registration suggestions.

Ascending octatonic scales constitute the fundamental musical element in this work. Ascent can be divided into five parts based on tempo changes.

Figure 7. The form of Ascent

Introduction: mm. 1-6
Section A: mm. 7-28
Transition I: mm. 29-32
Section B: mm. 33-67
Transition II: mm. 68-72
Section C: mm. 68-120
Section D: mm. 121-137
Section E: mm. 138-152
Coda: mm. 153-165

The introduction is in mm. 1-6. Tower uses thick chords in both hands with full sounds on the organ’s Great manual that produces a very commanding sound. Tower begins Ascent with octaves in the pedal, helping to produce a richness of sound in mm. 1-4. The performer must have a good rhythmic sense to properly place the chords on the off-beats in the opening measures.

Mm. 7-28 comprises section A which uses two different tempos (quarter note=40; quarter note=48). At the start of measure 7, Tower writes the instruction, “bring out” on the notes. This serves to emphasize the ascending scales found in mm. 7-10. By simply holding notes with the right hand while emphasizing the production of low to high
pitches with the left hand, the atmosphere of the composition is changed from imposing to tranquil.

Ex. 63: Tower, *Ascent*, mm. 1-9

In mm. 11-15, the left hand (positive manual) contains tenutos to help create a sense of upward direction. An accelerated tempo is produced by the rhythmic expansion from triplets to decuplets in the right hand part. Organists must use carefully prepared fingerings to accurately render the pentuplets, sextuplets, septuplets, etc.

In measures 16-23, Tower recreates the musical effect of the opening measures by going back to the Great manual and noting *ff* for the hands. Tower crafts rich textures by using the same notes for both hands.

In mm. 24-30, instead of using the organ’s pedals, Tower writes a “pedal” in the left hand on Bb. This pedal note is sustained for 7 measures. In the right hand, she

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creates contrasting expressions—a wide-leaping melody punctuated with staccatos. In this section Tower continues the use of ascending lines.

At this point I should like to point out what appears to be an error in the published score. The top system on page 3 of the score, mm. 29-31, will make more sense if the clef for the left hand is changed to a G treble clef.

Ex. 64: Tower, _Ascent_, mm. 29-31

Section B is in mm. 33-67. Using 3/8, Tower creates a new atmosphere by using more dotted rhythms and a more linear writing style. Grace notes appear on the left-hand chords, emphasizing the ascending motion.

Section C is in mm. 68-120. In this section several elements are “ascending.” The overall melody line ascends; the tempo increases with a required accelerando; and the volume reaches fortissimo. It is in 6/16 with continuous sixteenth-note rhythms in both hands and the pedal. Tower layers the notes using tone clusters in mm. 70-72.

In mm. 73-89, Tower uses active rhythms in both hands while the pedal is sustained with long notes. With constant sixteenth notes, she creates more excitement, perpetual motion, and energy.

In mm. 90-102, three voices move forward with fast rhythms. Besides the opening measures of the piece, here the pedal for the first time participates actively in the
“ascending” lines of the work. In this section the pedal notes are very challenging rhythmically. In mm. 90-100 the organist confronts the classic “three against two” challenge! Both hands are in triple time; the pedal is in duple.

Virtuosic pedaling is found in mm. 103-112. While the pedal notes are playing sixteenth notes, the hands use repeated chords, suggestive of the work’s opening measures. The pedal line includes a “wedge” effect, which reminds one of the subject of Bach’s great E-minor organ fugue. Adding to the difficulty of the section, the organist in m. 109 must negotiate a four-against-three rhythm. Tower writes four notes in the pedal against triplet chords in the hands.

Section D is in mm. 121-137. Tower uses repetitive patterns in both hands to enliven the score and add further motive energy.

Section E is in mm. 138-152. Tower uses a traditional compositional device for organ music—running sixteenth notes in the hands over long, sustained pedal notes. The hands play in octaves, creating a loud, tension-building effect that culminates in massive fff chords in mm. 150-152.

In the coda, mm. 153-165, the main compositional device is a massive decrescendo. In the space of 13 measures Tower goes from fff to ppp. This reminds one of other infamous decrescendos in organ music, notably the ending of Franck’s Chorale in B Minor. The ascending scalar motives continue, going higher and higher on the organ keyboard. Finally, the melody reaches the highest note possible on the organ, a C, three octaves above middle C. No more “ascending” is possible. The piece ends, in a hushed and tranquil mood.
Scales

In Tower’s second period solo keyboard works, she uses octatonic, chromatic, and whole-tone scales to great effect as an integral part of her writing. All three of these scales contribute to a sense of uncertain arrivals, of ambiguous movement and direction.

Octatonic Scales

Tower often uses the octatonic scale, which is the second mode used by Messiaen.\(^{237}\) Mode 2 has three possible unique transpositions: C diminished (C, D, Eb, F, F#, G#, A, B), Db diminished (Db, Eb, E, Gb, G, A, Bb, C), and D diminished (D, E, F, G, G#, A#, B, C#), and each of these pitch collections can begin with either a whole-step or a semitone. Each of the three octatonic collections contains two different fully-diminished 7th chords. For example, C octatonic contains C-Eb-F#-A and D-F-G#-B; Db octatonic contains Db-E-G-Bb and Eb-Gb-A-C; and D octatonic contains D-F-G#-B and E-G-A#-C#.

Tower uses all three octatonic scales in her second period solo keyboard works. In *Or like a…an Engine*, she uses a D diminished scale in m.10, an Eb diminished in m.45, and a Db diminished in m. 59 (Ex. 65). In *Vast Antique Cubes*, she uses a D diminished scale in mm. 4-6 and a Db diminished scale in mm. 10-11. In *Throbbing Still*, she uses an Eb diminished scale in mm. 12-19, a Db diminished scale in m. 28, and a D diminished scale in mm. 42-43 as well as mm. 73-74. In *Ascent*, she uses a Db diminished scale in mm. 1-10 (Ex. 66), a D diminished scale in mm. 11-15, (Ex. 66) and a Eb diminished in mm. 16-18.

Ex. 65: Tower, Or like a...an Engine, m. 59

Ex. 66: Tower, Ascent, mm. 1-14

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Chromatic Scales

Chromatic scales appear quite frequently in Tower’s solo keyboard works, to make transitions or to create a special mood. In *Holding a Daisy*, she uses chromatic scales in m. 15, mm. 20-21, mm. 29-32.

In *Or like a...an engine*, chromatic scales are found in m. 15 and m. 24.

Ex. 67: Tower, *Or like a...an Engine*, mm. 13-15, m. 24

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In *Big Steps*, both hands move up chromatically with different note values in mm. 46-57.

Ex. 68: Tower, *Big Steps*, mm. 43-57

Whole-tone Scales

Here are just two examples among many instances where Tower employs whole-tone scales. In *Holding a Daisy*, she uses a whole-tone scale in m. 5, using F, G, A, B, C# (Db), and Eb. In *Vast Antique Cubes*, she uses a whole-tone scale in mm. 19-20, using Ab, Bb, C, D, E, and F#. 
In *Big Steps*, Tower uses whole-tone scales in mm. 1-23, using C, D, E, F#, G#, and A#.

Ex. 69: Tower, *Big Steps*, mm. 1-23

**Harmony**

With her fertile and imaginative mind and ear, Tower incorporates a great variety of sounds and sonorities in her music. Her deviation from traditional harmonic elements produces Tower’s unique style. She uses the following sonorities in her solo keyboard works during her second period: ninth chords with altered fifth; dominant seventh chords
with unusual resolutions; parallel seventh chords with split thirds, split fifths, or split roots; triads with added seconds, fourths, and sixths; quartal chords and secundal chords. A detailed analysis of these examples follows.

**Ninth Chords with Altered Fifth or Added Fifth**

Tower uses a ninth chord with altered notes or added notes in the fifth. She uses the ninth chord with altered notes (sharp 5th) in measure 52 of *Holding a Daisy*. She uses Ab, C, E, G, B, which includes the altered notes sharp 5 (E) instead of Eb, and sharp 9 (B) instead of Bb, in the Ab major ninth chord. These non-traditional constructions thicken the texture of the music, and make the composition uniquely her own.

Ex. 70: Tower, *Holding a Daisy*, mm. 50-52

![Music notation](image)

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Tower uses the ninth chord with added notes (sharp 5th) in *Holding a Daisy*. She uses Db, F, Ab, Bbb (A), C, E in measure 53. She adds the altered notes, sharp 5 (A) in a Db ninth chord. This produces similar effects to those noted above.
Dominant Seventh Chords with Unusual Resolutions

Tower uses a dominant seventh chord with a 4-3 suspension in *Vast Antique Cubes*, m. 17. She uses a Bb dominant seventh chord, Bb, D, F, Ab, preceding the D with an Eb. However, she resolves the dominant seventh chord to the quartal sonority, B, E, A. This construction is both unexpected and unique adding interest for the performer and the listener.

Parallel Seventh Chords without Thirds

In *Or like a...an Engine*, Tower uses parallel seventh chords without 3rds in m. 84. She uses seventh chords with ascending lines from C7 to one octave higher C7 without 3rds. These are further unique elements similar to those previously noted.
Ex. 73: Tower, *Or like a...an engine*, m. 84

Tower also uses tertian chords with split chord members. According to Kostka, a music theorist, triads with an added minor second or minor third make a special kind of added-note chord. For example, triads and seventh chords will often have split thirds. Sometimes, triads split the roots and fifths. Also, seventh chords might split roots, fifths and sevenths. These special added-note chords expand the possibility for additional musical expression as compared with more traditional structures.

### Split Thirds, Fifths, and Roots in Triads

Tower creates a conflict with dissonances using split 3rds in minor or major triads. Specifically, in *Holding a Daisy*, she uses split thirds, Bb and B in a G triad in mm. 35 and 46. With such an arrangement the chord is neither major nor minor.

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As additional examples, in *Throbbing Still*, she uses Eb and E in a C triad in mm. 180-181 and mm. 297-298. In measure 192 she uses C# and C in an A triad. In measures 297-298, she uses Eb and E in a C triad.

Ex. 74: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 180-181

_split 3rds also appear in dominant seventh chords. For example, in mm. 188-191, Tower splits thirds, E and Eb, in a C dominant seventh chord. In mm. 276-277, she uses split 3rds in a F dominant seventh chord (F-A-C-Eb) using A and Ab. The dominant seventh chord with split 3rds is actually a dominant seventh with an augmented ninth (F-A-C-Eb-G# [Ab]) in mm. 276-277._

Ex. 75: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 276-277

Tower also uses a “split root” in the triads. For example, she splits F# and F in the F# major triad in m. 46. She employs F# and F in the F# minor triad in m. 281. She also uses F# and F in the F minor triad in mm. 273-274.
Tower uses “split fifths” in diminished triads. For example, she uses F and F# in a B diminished triad in m. 65. She uses Eb and E in an A diminished triad in mm. 229-231.

Triads with Added Second, Fourth, and Sixth

To standard triads Tower often adds 2nds, 4ths, and 6ths. Triads with added 6ths could be recognized as seventh chords. The triad with an added 2nd or 4th is an incomplete ninth or eleventh chord. The triad with an added 2nd appears in mm. 185-187. These are more deviations from traditional construction that produces Tower’s unique style. The C diminished chord--C, Eb, Gb with added D--appears in the third beat with sforzando in mm. 185-187.
Ex. 78: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 185-187

![Ex. 78: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 185-187](image1)

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Tower uses F# minor chords in mm. 279-280. And then she adds the minor second, F, in m. 281. Tower adds the sixth to the F# minor chords in mm. 282-288.

In measure 290, Tower uses F#-A-D, which is a D major chord in first inversion. In measure 291, Tower uses F#-A-D and F#-Ab-D, a D major chord with the fifth (A) alternating with its chromatic lower neighbor (Ab = G#). After using these D-rooted chords, Tower uses a B minor seventh chord (B-D-F#-A) in mm. 293-295.

**Quartal Chords**

As noted in chapter three, Tower was influenced by Schoenberg’s use of quartal harmonies. In *Throbbing Still*, measure 63 (Example 80), the left hand has a succession of five different fourths: Ab-D, F-B, E-A#, D-G#, and Db-G.

Ex. 79: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 62-63

![Ex. 79: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 62-63](image2)

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Quartal chords doubled in both hands produces a very dramatic effect in *Ascent*, mm. 107-110, F, B, E (m. 107), Gb, C, F (m. 108), G, C#, F# (m. 109), Ab, D, G (m. 109), A, D#, G# (m. 110), and Bb, E, A, (m. 110).

Ex. 80: Tower, *Ascent*, mm. 107-110

Secundal Chords

Secundal chords—chords built with intervals of a second—were used extensively by Stravinsky. They can often be understood as tone clusters. Tower writes secundal chords, G-Ab-B-C, in *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 45-46.

Ex. 81: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 45-46

Tower also uses secundal chords in *Throbbing Still*. In m. 146, she employs a secundal chord which is built from seconds, A, Bb, B, C#. She also utilizes this chord in
mm. 224-227. The first chords are F, Gb, A, B, C in mm. 224-227. The accented chords with *sffz* are G, A, Bb, C#, D. She makes use of two secundal chords in mm. 224-227 with *forte* and *sffz* dynamics.

Ex. 82: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 224-228

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*Rhythm*

Living in South America for a time and being exposed to its native dancing and percussion instruments influenced Tower’s use of rhythm. She describes the significance of rhythm: “Rhythm is the most important thing. The sense of moving from one place to another--within the rhythm, within the line--is very important, because the dynamics and the register all come out of that sense of flowing, driving and falling.”239 Tower mixes regular and irregular rhythms together in order to create a shifting pulse. Tower’s rhythmic devices include meter changes, no time signatures, syncopation, dotted rhythms, and ostinato rhythms with changing meters.

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239 Rischin, 6.
Meter Changes

The meter changes that Tower uses often shift the mood from calm to very energetic, or the opposite. According to Tower, “I use meter change just to deal with phrases, basically. Most of the meter changes are because of changes of phrases and changes of ideas.”

In the opening measures of Red Garnet Waltz she writes six measures in 3/4, eight measures in 3/8, two measures in 3/4, one measure in 5/8, one measure in 3/4, and one measure in 5/8. The listener, on the basis of the work’s title perhaps expecting to hear a traditional “waltz in three,” will surely be surprised.

\(^{240}\) Interview with the author.
Red Garnet Waltz is not a traditional waltz, but, according to Tower, a compositional study of the number three. Tower combines meters 3/8 and 5/8 with the traditional waltz meter, 3/4. She explained, “You can see the piece also has a struggle with rhythm. It is 3/4, but it’s like I was fighting the 3/4 the whole time. I did not want to make it too obvious; I did not want people to know it was 3/4.”

Tower shows frequent meter changes also in Or like a...an Engine in mm. 59-67. Tower changes meter seven times using 4/4 (m. 59), 3/8(mm. 60-61), 3/4(mm. 62-63),

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241 Ibid.
4/4(m. 64), 3/8(m. 65), 2/4(m. 66), and 5/8(m. 67). During the changing meters the running sixteenth notes remain constant. According to Tower, “When the meter changes, the downbeat should necessarily be brought out.” The example that follows illustrates this viewpoint; accent and dynamic marks appear on most of the downbeats of measures where the meter changes.

Ex. 84: Tower, *Or like a...an Engine*, mm. 59-67

![Ex. 84](image)

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**No Time Signature**

By not including a time signature, Tower removes emphasis from individual beats to highlight rhythmic groups and the continuous flow of the music. She may want to create a more improvisatory-sounding composition by not using time signatures. The

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242 Ibid.
first five measures in *Or like a...an Engine* do not have any time signatures. Because Tower does not arrange the groups of notes in a regular pattern it is difficult to feel the beat. Further, she also does not use time signatures in mm. 25-33, mm. 39-41, and mm. 49-53 of *Or like a...an Engine*.

Ex. 85: Tower, *Or like a...an Engine*, mm. 24-27

![Musical notation](image)

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Similar to *Or like a...an Engine*, Tower’s use of no time signatures acts as a transition between different passages in *Throbbing Still*. In this piece Tower does not use time signatures in m.19, 56, 142, 275, 278, 296-297. The lack of time signatures combined with the tempo indications “freely,” “accel.,” and “Ad lib” creates a cadenza-like, improvisatory feeling.
Syncopation

The use of syncopation creates metric uncertainty in Tower’s music. In *Red Garnet Waltz*, she stresses parts of the beat that are normally unstressed. In mm. 1-5 she places an accent on the A in measure 2 and on the F# in measure 4, calling attention to these syncopated notes. Interestingly, each syncopated chord in m. 4 contains two different dynamic marks with the stronger note on top.

Ex. 86: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 1-5

Tower also places accents on the upbeats in mm. 157-158 of *Throbbing Still*.

This is one of many examples in this piece where the accented syncopations create startling, piercing sounds that interrupt the regular pulse.

Ex. 87: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 157-158

Dotted Rhythms

Tower uses dotted rhythms to create excitement or drama. Frequently the dotted rhythms are the short-long variety (a modern reincarnation of the Baroque Scottish snap!)
Ex. 88: Tower, *Holding a Daisy*, mm. 29-31

![Musical notation image](image)

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The second example, from *Throbbing Still*, shows accented pickup sixteenth notes in the right hand against even quarters in the left hand. This dotted pattern (the long-short format) commands immediate attention with fanfare-like sounds.

Ex. 89: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 1-5

![Musical notation image](image)

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**Ostinato Rhythms and Patterns**

Ostinato rhythms and patterns must be considered one of Tower’s signature compositional devices. These ostinatos, appearing in all of the fast-moving sections of her solo keyboard pieces from the second compositional period, create an almost obsessive, motoric, energetic forward motion. A notable example from *Or like a...an Engine* follows:
This chapter concludes with a number of brief suggestions for the performance of Joan Tower’s solo keyboard music. As with other contemporary music, paying close attention to the score is critical. Tower herself commented on the precision with which composers may notate their music:

In music we have a score. Unlike any other art form, other than architecture, we have a specific notation. It says dotted half, forte, diminuendo; the whole thing is controlled very heavily in classical music. It’s not in jazz. It’s not in ethnic cultural music. It’s not in pop. It’s not in rock. Just in classical music. It’s controlled. So you say, ‘How did this come about and why is it so controlling?’ I think it is because composers were thinking quite deeply about the music and they wanted to make sure that it comes out the way they thought it should come out and they give more and more detail.243

Score Indications

As might be expected Tower provides many conventional dynamic and articulation marks in her solo keyboard music, including: “appassionato,” “broad,”

243 Ibid.
“full,” “marc..,” “agitato,” “senza pedal,” “dolce,” “delicate,” and “martellato.” However, she goes beyond these terms with more unusual markings, such as “dans une brume [in a haze],” “clearer,” “let fade,” “intensively,” “like hammers,” “l.v.” and “resonant.” These markings will help the pianist and organist to more fully realize the composer’s intentions.

**Pedals**

Tower uses both the sostenuto pedal and the damper pedal in her second period solo keyboard works. Although Tower occasionally writes “ad lib” to give freedom to pianists, she often indicates exact pedal markings in her scores. She emphasized the use of the pedal in her interview: “The pedal is important in piano especially when you have texture, sounds, and things going on. It’s not obvious if a pedal is used here or there; you have to control it so as not to overuse it.”244

In mm. 1-5 of *Vast Antique Cubes* Tower uses one damper pedal to create more space. These measures softly and slowly explore what Tower calls widespread piano overtones.

Ex. 91: Tower, *Vast Antique Cubes*, mm. 1-5

![Ex. 91: Tower, Vast Antique Cubes, mm. 1-5](Used by Permission, Associated Music Publishers (BMI). See Acknowledgements.)

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244 Ibid.
In m. 53 of *Holding a Daisy* Tower uses an ostinato rhythm; the motive appears ten times with the damper pedal depressed the entire time. This makes for a fading effect and creates a subtle image like the title of the piece.

Ex. 92: Tower, *Holding a Daisy*, m. 53

When Tower uses the sostenuto pedal, she wants to keep the pedal note clear so the listener can hear the conflict between the pedal notes and the surrounding voices.

Tower uses a sostenuto pedal in order to avoid mixing notes in *Red Garnet Waltz*. See the following examples.

Ex. 93: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 50-58, mm. 69-73
Tower uses the sostenuto pedal on G in *Red Garnet Waltz* in mm. 16-17. She uses the sostenuto pedal on pedal note F in mm. 19-22.

Ex. 94: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 16-24
In *Throbbing Still* mm. 144-147, Tower uses the sostenuto pedal on the F-Ab doubled minor third. The top voices have sharp and punctuated sounds.

Ex. 95: Tower, *Throbbing Still*, mm. 143-147

Unlike the sostenuto pedal, the damper pedal is used to mix sounds, to create a greater sonority. In *Red Garnet Waltz*, Tower uses the damper pedal in mm. 27-33.

Ex. 96: Tower, *Red Garnet Waltz*, mm. 25-34
Tower changes the pedal when the notes should be accentuated in *Or like a... an Engine*. For example, measure 3 has the accents on B, A, Ab by using the damper pedal.

Ex. 97: Tower, *Or like a... an Engine*, mm. 2-3

![Ex. 97: Tower, *Or like a... an Engine*, mm. 2-3](image)

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Tower also uses the damper pedal to highlight textural changes in mm. 26-27 of *Or like a... an Engine*.

Ex. 98: Tower, *Or like a... an engine*, mm. 26-27

![Ex. 98: Tower, *Or like a... an engine*, mm. 26-27](image)

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In summary, pianists will see that Tower has given careful thought to the use of both the damper and the sostenuto pedals in her music. (Interestingly, I have not found any indications for the use of the una corda pedal.) Pianists are encouraged to follow the composer’s pedal markings closely.
CHAPTER SIX
SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Summary

Tower has composed numerous instrumental compositions including works for orchestras, bands, small ensembles, and solo instruments. Tower’s major orchestral works include *Sequoia, Silver Ladders, Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, and *Made in America*. In terms of Tower’s keyboard works, she wrote two piano concertos (*Piano Concerto No.1, Piano Concerto No.2*), one two-piano piece (*Stepping Stones*), five solo piano pieces (*Circles, Fantasia, Red Garnet Waltz, No Longer Very Clear, Big Steps*), and one organ piece (*Ascent*).

I have discussed the origin of the titles of Tower’s solo keyboard works. The first period works contain abstract titles while the works from the second period include descriptive, evocative titles.

Tower’s music can be divided into two periods: her first period (before 1974) and the period after 1974. During her first period Tower wrote two solo piano works, *Circles* and *Fantasia*. Her compositions before 1974 use contemporary keyboard techniques, twelve-tone row forms, and complex structures. In order to create different timbres, Tower employs modern keyboard techniques including tone clusters on the keyboard; and glissandi, plucked strings, and muted strings inside the piano. *Circles* and *Fantasia* are serial compositions. Based on tempo changes, *Circles* can be divided into five sections and *Fantasia* into six sections. Tower employs “special ratio rhythms” with
pointillistic notes in *Circles* and *Fantasia*. She uses complex rhythms; she writes in the extreme registers of the piano with frequent meter changes.

Tower did not use twelve-tone row forms during her second period. After 1974 she strove to create her own compositional voice. Her second period solo keyboard works are *Red Garnet Waltz*, *Or like a...an Engine*, *Holding a Daisy*, *Vast Antique Cubes*, *Throbbing Still*, *Big Steps* and her organ piece, *Ascent*. In 2005 Tower collected four pieces (*Holding a Daisy*, *Or Like a...an Engine*, *Vast Antique Cubes*, *Throbbing Still*) into one piano collection, *No Longer Very Clear*.

Generally Tower starts with a single idea or motive, and then develops the entire piece. Tower labels this her “organic process.” Her solo keyboard works are not lengthy and reveal her intuitive compositional plan using the organic process. She prefers one-movement forms, and these forms are established largely by through-composed devices.

She was influenced by other composers’ pieces. For example, her use of dissonant repeated chords shows the influence of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. Repetitive rhythms derive from Bartok’s *Contrasts*. She was influenced by Debussy’s seventh and ninth chords. She recalls those composers’ characteristics not in obvious but in very subtle ways.

In *No Longer Very Clear, Holding a Daisy* is divided into three parts by rhythmic motives. The beginning is calm and quiet and gives no hint of the intense energy that comes in the central part of the piece. There is a palpable feeling of frenzied excitement and drama throughout most of the final section of the work. The piece ends as it began, very quietly.

*Or like a...an Engine*, a through-composed work, is a hard-driving, high energy toccata-like piece. Tower uses perpetual motion with ostinato figures from start to finish.

*Vast Antique Cubes*, the shortest piece of *No Longer Very Clear*, in contrast to the other pieces in the suite, projects a mood of serenity and calm. Tower expresses an atmospheric feeling and spacing similar to the sonorities of Debussy. In this piece time seems to stand still.

*Throbbing Still*, also through-composed, reveals complex textures, a driving, motoric rhythm, and a powerful ending that befits the last piece in the suite. The work portrays various musical contrasts—lyrical singing writing with virtuosic and brilliant passagework. Tower creates special musical effects including shimmering lines, pointillistic notes, suspenseful moods, and hammer-like chords throughout this piece.

*Big Steps*, a teaching piece for young pianists, highlights the pitch names of the whole steps C-D and D-E. Tower uses whole-tone scales to pay homage to Debussy.

In *Ascent*, Tower’s only piece for pipe organ, the composer displays a remarkable variety of compositional devices and color effects. These include dramatic dynamic changes, thin textures juxtaposed with massive chordal passages, virtuosic manual and pedal writing, complicated rhythms, and very detailed registration suggestions. Ascending octatonic scales constitute the fundamental musical element in this work.
Instead of major or minor scales, Tower employs octatonic, chromatic, and whole-tone scales in her solo keyboard works. Her harmony is comprised of non-traditional chords—ninth chords with alternate fifths or added fifths; dominant seventh chords with unusual resolutions; parallel seventh chords with split thirds, split fifths, or split roots; triads with added seconds, fourths, and sixths; quartal chords and secundal chords.

Her rhythms are diverse, energetic and include frequent meter changes. She creates improvisatory, transitional, and cadenza-like effects by including sections without time signatures. With syncopations, strongly dotted rhythms, and ostinatos she creates energetic motion, and forward-moving, flowing effects.

Tower’s keyboard works include very demanding virtuosic works like *Red Garnet Waltz, No Longer Very Clear*, and *Ascent*. On the other hand, *Big Steps* is a teaching piece for the intermediate pianist.

**Suggestions for Further Study**

In addition to Tower’s solo keyboard works, she also composed *Piano Concerto no.1, Piano Concerto no.2*, and the two-piano piece, *Stepping Stones*. There is no detailed research available on *Piano Concerto no.2* and *Stepping Stones*. *Piano Concerto No.2* was performed and recorded by Ursula Oppens. *Stepping Stones* was recorded on New World Records by Double Edges. *Stepping Stones* was originally written for an orchestra, so it would be interesting to compare the two versions. Also, *Stepping Stones* has been choreographed for a ballet. It may be valuable to know how the music from *Stepping Stones* is portrayed in the ballet. During her involvement as a collaborative pianist in Da Capo Chamber Players, Tower wrote a great deal of chamber ensemble
music, including piano chamber music. Tower’s piano chamber music might be researched to gain a better understanding of her writing for piano. There are a number of piano chamber music works that include piano with solo instrument: *Très Lent* for cello and piano; *Opa Eboni* for oboe and piano; * Movements* for flute and piano; *Fantasy... (Those Harbor Lights)* for clarinet and piano, piano trios (*And... They’re Off!, For Daniel, Big Sky, Rain Waves, Trio Cavany*), piano quintets (*Amazon I, Breakfast Rhythms I and II, Dumbarton Quintet, A Gift, Petroushskates, Prelude for Five Players*), and piano sextets (*Noon Dance, Black Topaz*).

I hope that this study will not only promote a better understanding and appreciation of Joan Tower’s solo keyboard music, but also lead to increased performances of these remarkable works.
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APPENDIX

Interview with Joan Tower

At her home in Red Hook, New York, November 1, 2008

TRANSSCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW WITH JOAN TOWER

JJ: Where were you born?

JT: I was born in New Rochelle, New York, 1938.

JJ: Where is it? Is it close to your present home?

JT: It is just north New York City.

JJ: Do you often go there?

JT: No. My family actually lived in Larchmont, New York. I was born in a hospital in New Rochelle, but, Larchmont is right next door.

I spent the first nine years of my life in a very comfortable environment in Larchmont. I had my little peanut butter sandwiches in a box lunch and my little bicycle that had a basket. I went to school and had lots of friends. It was a very idyllic, wonderful, safe environment.

I was lucky to be taken to Bolivia, South America, at the age of nine because that shook everything up...the foundations...everything. I had to learn a new language, a new culture, a new everything. I eventually wound up loving South America and the Latin People. It put me into a whole new perspective on another culture. I was there for five years.

Then for two years I went to Santiago, Chile, and was in a very strict boarding school. I spent all my time breaking the rules. I must have been really unhappy because I remember clearly once opening a window; there was an oriental rug there. I got down on my knees and I prayed to some God the rug would take me up and out of that place!

JJ: Like Aladdin?

JT: Exactly! Then I went to Lima, Peru, because my father got tuberculosis. He was taken to a hospital in Lima but had to be transferred back to the United States because he was quite sick with tuberculosis. We spent a year in Lima where I had a great time because I had a year off school. I went horseback riding. I went to secretarial school where I learned shorthand and typing.
At that time, was typing popular for all women?

Typing, yes. Shorthand too, which I have since forgotten. I never used it.

I came back to the United States and went to another private school in Massachusetts called Walnut Hill. When I went, it was a stuffy upper class and very elitist school. All the girls wore cashmere sweaters and black pumps and I was this wild thing from South America! I had long hair with loud, colorful skirts. I didn’t fit in at all. It has since become a performing arts school and has changed completely.

The school invited me to a celebrity series this past spring. They are bringing back their famous alumni. This is the first time I agreed to go back.

So then I went to Wheelock Teachers College for two years.

Where is it?

Boston. I couldn’t get into any better college because my grades were so low. I was so miserable at that time. I lasted there for two years. Then, I decided that I wanted to go to Radcliffe in Boston.

I had a boyfriend who had a motorcycle; he was at Harvard so I wanted to go to be near him.

I went to the admissions officer at Radcliffe. She interviewed me for two hours. She was really fascinated by me on a certain level. She said, “You really have an interesting background. I tell you what, I want you go up and check out Bennington in Vermont.” I had never heard of it. She said, “If you don’t like Bennington, I will try to get you in Radcliffe. But quite frankly, I don’t think that you would be too happy at Radcliffe.” Radcliffe was a very intellectual, scholarly kind of place. It was not my cup of tea and she knew that.

So I said, “O.K., that’s a deal!” I went up to Bennington and fell in love with it. She was absolutely right. She saved my life! I paid tribute to her when I gave the commencement speech at Bennington years later. She completely put me in the right direction.

You went to South America when you were nine years old. What was your first impression of South America?

It was traumatic, because I couldn’t speak the language. I was only nine years old and I had been in a very comfortable environment. They had revolutions every six weeks or so and everything was incredibly new to me. I bounced back pretty fast. I learned Spanish in three months!
JJ: You did not learn it before you went?

JT: No. I learned it because I had to. It was survival.

JJ: Did you make a lot of friends there?

JT: Yes. I made friends there. I remember I had a lot of boyfriends. I was boy crazy.

I played piano and studied with Mrs. Erich von Stroheim. (Erich von Stroheim was a famous movie director.) She knew I was talented and she was on me right from the get go. I advanced pretty fast. Then I switched teachers when I went to Chile. I kept switching teachers, which became a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it screwed up my technique because everybody had a different teaching method. On the other hand, it enabled me to go into composing instead of being a solo pianist, which I would have probably done.

JJ: What did you like to play, what was your piano repertoire at that time?

JT: We went the traditional route. Bach’s Prelude and Fugue, Chopin’s Nocturnes and Chopin’s Etudes, Beethoven’s Sonatas, etc.

JJ: Did you attend some concerts?

JT: These teachers all had recitals. I was usually the last one in the recitals.

JJ: You were the best?

JT: I was the best and most advanced. Other than that, I didn’t go to concerts.

JJ: Did you learn any other instruments?

JT: Yes. That was through dancing. I had a nurse who was an Incan woman, a very beautiful Incan woman. She was looking for a boy friend; she took me to these festivals--beautiful, colorful, festivals. There were these wild festivals where women wore colorful, multiple skirts and men wore devil masks, and they danced and danced. I wanted to participate, so they would hand me a percussion instrument—I was 9 or 10 at the time—and I would bang on the drums, maracas and tambourines. I played with bands and I was perfectly happy to do that.

That’s when I started getting involved with percussion.

JJ: Did they play just percussion?

JT: No, they had different kinds of flutes and other instruments. They didn’t have strings as far as I know at that time, but wind instruments with percussion and guitars.
JJ: Were they trained?

JT: No. They were totally folk people, self-taught.

I would get up and dance. I love to dance. I think these two things—percussion and dancing—had huge effect on me later on. But the piano music I was doing was classical, the music of dead white European males.

JJ: Did you compose at that time?

JT: Not at all. No composing until I was eighteen at Bennington.

JJ: How did you start?

JT: They had a class in which you were supposed to compose. So I wrote a piece which was horrible. I was sitting there. I said, “This is so bad.” (laughing). So I wrote another piece which was a little bit better. It took me years to like anything I wrote. I thought everything I did was a horror show. That was a way into music that was so different from playing the piano. That kept my curiosity up. The torture still was there, but it was another way into music. I have always been interested in different ways to experience music.

JJ: What was your first piece?

JT: The first piece that I remember was very big—thirteen instruments. I think it was in the style of Bolero because I had no control over form. It was like adding—one instrument, then two instruments.

JJ: Who were the composition teachers at Bennington?

JT: Louis Calabro, Henry Brant, Lionel Novak. Lionel was also my piano teacher. I adored him. I practiced more hours for him than anybody else. There was a cellist there, George Finkel, who is the uncle of David Finkel from the Emerson Quartet. He was a huge influence. We played Beethoven sonatas together. Bennington was the perfect place for me because I could play all day and compose the rest of time. I just blossomed like a flower there.

JJ: Did you take other classes too?

JT: Yes. I took writing. It was torture. English…my grammar was not very good. I could speak, but I never had a grammar class.

JJ: You are better than me.

JT: (Laughing)...You could probably write better than I can.
We had to write stories every four or five weeks. The class was short story writing taught by Gene Baro. It was so difficult. Writing stories is like composing. It was complete torture. At the end of the semester he called me into his office. I thought that he called me in to tell me that I was failing because my stories were so bad. He says, “Joan, do you want to be a writer?” I said, “What? Do you think my stories were that good? Do you know what I had to go through to write those stories?” He said, “I am not interested in your process or your problems. I am just interested in your results. They are good.” You know, I was shocked that he would think that.

Then I wanted to major in physics because there was a fantastic teacher there. He was very creative. He would bring in a box with a string attached. He would pull on the string on one side and on the other side something would happen. A ball would bounce or something like that. He said, “Now, go home and a design three possible scenarios for what is going on inside of this box.” It was fascinating to me. Of course, though, the math—forget it. I couldn’t do the math. I was interested in the concept of action and reaction, which is what interests me in music. That is why I was interested in physics.

JJ: Did you play the piano too?

JT: All the time.

JJ: Did you have exams like piano proficiency or recitals?

JT: They didn’t do exams at Bennington. I don’t think they even had grades. They had these sheets where the professor writes a paragraph about you describing how you have been doing. It is a much nicer way of dealing with a person. Tests and exams can put you in a passive kind of role rather than an active role. For a test, you are asked to memorize this book for the next week, regurgitate it—and then you forget it later. Why? Because it is not a part of your inner “motivated fuel line.”

JJ: I agree.

JT: The problem is as far as I am concerned—and this is another whole subject—it’s very complicated. With writing music, something must come from the inside. You can’t keep coming from the outside because if you do, you are never going to develop a voice. If you don’t have a voice, you’re going nowhere. You are just replicating other music and it really is not very interesting because there is no voice. I teach my students at the get-go about that. I know that I can get them going right away. I don’t have to wait for years to find the voice.
In music, if you keep going along that path, at some point somebody’s not
defining the path for you anymore. Then what do you do? “Oh, my God, nobody
is defining this for me anymore! What do I do?” As you grow older, the
definition of you from the outside does not work forever. It works in school, up
to a point. Then it’s removed; the school is removed. Then it’s “Oh, which ocean
do I swim in now?” You know, it’s very scary. So what I do with my students is
to try to give them an inner fuel line, I call it, that will enable them once they get
out of Bard, to go for something that they are interested in. Not just the
credential. The credentials will be there. They will get this award or that award.
Maybe they will get into a good school; maybe they won’t. But, they have got to
have that inner fuel line. That’s their survival. That’s their life.

JJ: It is very hard to get.

JT: With music, it is complicated because it’s not quite that easy to become a
composer of some kind of reputation. What does that mean? Well, it means
basically writing a good piece! You can win a Pulitzer or Grawemeyeyer. You can
be teaching at Yale; you can be doing all these things. Those things actually don’t
guarantee anything. There are plenty of Pulitzer Prize winners that don’t get
played. There are people teaching composition at big name schools that have few
performances.

I learned this through writing my solo clarinet piece Wings—an early piece from
1980. I wrote it for the clarinet player in my Da Capo Chamber Players, Laura
Flax. I worked hard on that piece because I love the clarinet. She played it at her
recital in New York. There were five clarinetists there. All of them came up to
me and said, “When is Wings available?” I said, “I will have to check with Laura.”

So three of them, at least, played it at their recitals with another five or ten
clarinetists in attendance (clarinetists go to each other’s recitals). Pretty soon this
piece took off like wild fire. It was all over the place.

JJ: Was it transposed to saxophone?

JT: Yes. Now it is being played by saxophonists.

That piece led to a lot of things. Why? Not because I was known, because I
wasn’t. I was sort of known in New York. But it was because of the piece. The
piece suddenly gave me a strength that was unusual. I learned a big lesson from
that. It was: if the music says something, it will take off, especially in certain
worlds like the flute world or clarinet world or percussion world.
JJ: Do you want to give freedom to the performers, the pianists in your works?

JT: That is a very complex subject because in music we have a score. Unlike any other art form, other than architecture, we have a specific notation. It says dotted half, forte, diminuendo; the whole thing is controlled very heavily in classical music. It’s not in jazz. It’s not in ethnic cultural music. It’s not in pop. It’s not in rock. Just in classical music. It’s controlled.

So you say, “How did this come about and why is it so controlling?” Well, I think because composers were thinking quite deeply about the music and they wanted to make sure that it comes out the way they thought it should come out and they gave more and more detail.

Beethoven is one of my favorite composers. He discovered the metronome. The metronome actually was built during his time by Mälzel. He was ecstatic. Because these words Andante, Allegro, Largo were so vague people were misusing them to interpret music in pretty bad ways. He was very upset because it would affect the music in a significant way. So this metronome gave him the ultimate answer. “I can actually say that a quarter note equals 120!”

Of course, metronomes at the time were different than they are now. Some of his metronome markings are off the wall. Maybe his metronome was off calibration. Did people play faster then? I don’t think so. I think people play faster now.

JJ: There are clear metronome markings in your scores.

JT: Yes, I am big on metronomes because of the control thing. I want it at this tempo. I think Beethoven was the same way. On the other hand Bach had a different agenda. His music doesn’t fall apart if you play it at the wrong tempo because the DNA of the music is different. I always ask myself about the DNA of a composer. Is it about color, rhythm, or the harmonic structure? What is this about?” Beethoven was about rhythm! He really cared about how local- and large-scale rhythms projected through his music.

JJ: So that’s why you adored Beethoven, because of his focus on rhythm?

JT: Yes, that and his deep concern for what I call motivated architecture. He had a sense of music that is motivated.

JJ: Do you change the music a lot when writing?

JT: Yes, I will show you some of my early sketch books.

JJ: *Circles* is your first piano piece?
JT: I was involved with serial music at that time. This was in the 60s and 70s, early 70s. I was playing a lot of difficult music at that time like Babbitt, Wolpe, Wuorinen. It is all incredibly challenging music.

JJ: Are they related to twelve-tone music?

JT: Yes, very contrapuntal and pointillistic.

I learned how to count. So the rhythms in my pieces, at that time, were rhythms I could do. I’ve changed my style from that point. But, I am very good with rhythm.

JT: I teach my students how to subdivide. But, one doesn’t need to get that complicated.

JJ: The range is very broad. Also, it seems that the pedal is important too. You have clear pedal markings.

JT: Pedal is important in piano, especially when you have texture, sounds things going, it’s not obvious if a pedal is used here or there, you have to control it.

JJ: Do you prefer any particular piano?

JT: I own four pianos. I have a Yamaha Disklavier, a Steinway A, an old Steinway--which I’m selling--it is from the 1860s, an antique. I have a Baldwin at school. (I have a synthesizer but I don’t use it very much.)

JJ: I found a lot of interesting piano techniques in *Circles* and *Fantasia*. Why did you use such techniques as the finger nail at the end of *Fantasia*?

JT: It was an effect I guess I wanted at that time. I don’t remember those pieces very well.

JJ: I have never seen that mark, fingernails, before.

JT: Really? It is used a lot. George Crumb uses it a lot. But generally composers are not going inside of the piano too much because it ruins the piano. (Laughing) I played a lot inside of the piano. But it is a hard work.

JJ: As a performer, we want to know, “Do I play the downbeat on arpeggios scales?”

JT: Yes. That comes up out of traditional thinking of arpeggios. It’s important when it is a piece about rhythm. It is important whether you are landing on the top or you are starting on the bottom. In a piece that has a sense of rhythm, that is a very important choice. If a piece doesn’t have sense of rhythm, it doesn’t matter. You don’t know where you are in the beat.
JJ:  Are *Circles* and *Fantasia* published now?

JT:  They did not get published by Schirmer. They are with the American Composers Alliance. They are really early works. (She showed the tape containing *Circles* and *Fantasia* to me). Here is the tape. *Fantasia* by John McCauley, piano.

JJ:  Did you play *Circles* often?

JT:  Yes. I played *Circles*. *Circles* was my first solo piano piece. *Fantasia* was my second solo piano piece. And then I wrote it as an orchestra work for my dissertation, for my master's. It's horrible. It's badly orchestrated.

Actually, I like *Fantasia* better than *Circles*.

I played *Fantasia* many times. Actually, I play everything I wrote except a new piano trio (*Trio Cavany*) that is probably too hard for me.

JJ:  What were your main techniques in *Circles* and *Fantasia*?

JT:  Those pieces are so far away from me. Those are student pieces from my days at Columbia University.

JJ:  Why did you use the titles *Circles* and *Fantasia*?

JT:  Well, I think I used that word as a cop-out because *Fantasia* could be used to mean anything. I have no idea. At that time, I was not thinking of titles as I was later.

Later, I started really to think about the titles. Now I am getting good at titles.

JJ:  How about *Red Garnet Waltz*?

JT:  *Red Garnet Waltz* is actually simple. My father was a geologist and a mining engineer. I wanted to dedicate a series of pieces to him through [names of] minerals and metals. So, I looked up in his books, minerals...the right mineral. Garnet is a very hardcore mineral. It has a chisel shape to it and they are small. I guess I thought of the piece as being kind of red as it's very motivic and angular.

JJ:  Why the Waltz?

JT:  Because it is all about threes.

JJ:  *Red Garnet Waltz* seems more mature than *Circles* and *Fantasia*.


JJ:  How did you change from when you wrote *Circles* and *Fantasia*?
JT: The first two were written 1964 and 1966, and the other was written in 1977. A twelve year gap. I am still finding my voice. 1977, that’s interesting, because my voice really started to change in 1974 and 1975.

I wrote a piece called Black Topaz. That was the changing piece. It was written for piano and six instruments. Black Topaz is a significant piece in my repertoire. It is a real attempt to use my own voice in a raw, straight forward and risky way. I still like that piece. I wrote it in 1976.

It’s also about changing colors from dissonance and consonant overall. Topaz is a mineral again, another mineral that can change color. Black is the piano. Interestingly, that piece comes a year before Red Garnet Waltz, which is part of a series of mineral pieces.

JJ: Did you write the pieces for yourself as a pianist-composer?

JT: No. Robert Helps commissioned a series of waltzes, which is the waltz collection. The pieces were commissioned by C. F. Peters. I was a friend of Bob Helps, a fantastic pianist, and also a composer. I said “Yes” immediately because he was my friend. I would do anything for him.

But writing for solo piano has been very difficult for me and this wasn’t an easy piece to write. It’s wonderful collection. I am not that thrilled about my own piece.

Eric Moe recorded a selection of these waltzes. He’s from University of Pittsburgh, a composer-pianist.

JJ: It seems that the middle section has overtones like Debussy.

JT: I think Red Garnet Waltz is another piece with consonance and dissonance. You can see the piece also has a struggle with rhythm. It is 3/4, but it’s like I was fighting the 3/4 the whole time. I did not want to make it too obvious. I did not want people to know it was 3/4 which, at that time, was part of the thinking. You never wanted to be too obvious.

JJ: Red Garnet Waltz seems to change meter a lot.

JT: That’s why the piece is not that strong. It does not have continuity, excitement.

JJ: Did you choreograph this music for a ballet? I notice that the music was associated with a ballet.
JT: Yes. The New York City Ballet Company choreographed the whole waltz project. The head of the New York City Ballet, Peter Martins, did the choreography. It’s very interesting what he did with that; it was fascinating.

JJ: Has anyone else choreographed your compositions?

JT: Yes. I have three pieces that are choreographed. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Mark Godden did *Sequoia*; the San Francisco Ballet with Helgi Tomasson did *Silver Ladders*; the Milwaukee Ballet with Kathryn Posin--and other ballets--did *Stepping Stones*. It’s also arranged for two pianos.

JJ: After *Red Garnet Waltz*, what was your next solo piano piece?

JT: *No Longer Very Clear*, which started with *Or like a…an Engine*. Before that, I wrote two piano concertos.

This is what is interesting about the piano world. The activity level and the asking-for-pieces level is how I define the culture of that particular instrument. The instrument that wins is the flute. Flutists are always commissioning pieces, all styles of pieces.

I have gone to two of their conventions, which are every year. It’s filled with living composers. They view composers as just a natural part of their landscape. Flutists are go-getters; they organize everything. All the new music groups in New York are, by and large, run by flutists. Do you know why?

JJ: Flutists are good friends of composers?

JT: They are aggressive, go-getters, and they are very interested in creating a wide-ranging repertoire.

JJ: How about pianists?

JT: Pianists are a mixed-bunch. There are some very good ones that devote themselves entirely to new music and some that like to mix old and new repertoire.

Ursula Oppens and Peter Serkin…not many are at that level. YoYo Ma is a particularly interesting person in this regard. He has a deep musical curiosity that led him into new music--Brazilian music, dance and much more. He doesn’t care about the credentials of it or how it will help his career or anything like that. He is genuinely curious.

JJ: Where did the title *No Longer Very Clear* come from?

JJ: How do you know him?

JT: He is my colleague at Bard.

JJ: How did you choose titles?

JT: He wrote a poem called *No Longer Very Clear*. Inside that poem, are all those phrases: or like a...an engine, holding a daisy, vast antique cubes, and throbbing still. They are all in that poem.

JJ: Did you choose all these titles?

JT: Yes. There is a story behind this piano suite. WNYC-FM commissioned the first one, *Or like a...an Engine*. They said, “We would like you to be a part of this arts celebration.” We’ve got a poem by John Ashbery. We were wondering if you could do something with it.” I said, “No, sorry, I don’t use words.”

They said, “No no...you don’t understand. You can use this poem any way you want. You can write anything you want.” I said, “Well, that’s a little bit different, send me the poem.”

There were fantastic images inside the poem. I saw the phrase, or like a...an engine. I thought, “This will be my title of my first piece.” I called them up and said, “I’ll do it.”

So I wrote the piece, which was a challenge. Solo piano music is not easy for me.

Next, Sarah Rothenberg from the Da Camera Society of Music said. “I want you to write a piano piece for my recital in NY.” So I said, “Well I’ll make a companion piece to *Or like a...an Engine*. So I’ll make a slow piece and wrote “Holding a Daisy.”

Then, Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania called and said, “We would like you to write a piano piece for our piano series.” I had previously met John Browning at the New York Philharmonic. He said he liked my *Concerto for Orchestra*. He was not a guy who played new music, except for Barber. I said, “I hope they can get him. I would like a pianist of his stature to have a good experience with a composer at least once or twice.” He had that experience with Barber, but nothing since. So I called him and he said, “Yes.”

This is how I got introduced to John Browning actually... we were sitting at the New York Philharmonic and they were playing my *Concerto for Orchestra*. He was not somebody who paid a whole lot of attention to new music. He is sitting
there in the box listening to my piece. He came up to me, I didn’t know him that well, and he said, “You know, the interesting thing about listening to your piece was I never went outside of it.” That means he never had a thought like, “That is somebody opening a door there or, that sounds like Beethoven.” There was never an outside thought while he was listening to my piece. That’s a huge compliment to me…huge. Probably the best compliment I can get. Next to “What else do you have for bassoon?” or something like that. That is another kind of compliment. So, that is how I got introduced to John Browning and how I became interested in him.

So I wrote *Vast Antiques Cubes* and *Throbbing Still*, which are so difficult. I came to the hall to work with him. The tempos and accelerandos were not right. All the connections were wrong. I mean, he was changing and experimenting and making it his own piece, but the choices were wrong. He wasn’t doing it right. We had, like, two hours. So I started very carefully. I said, “Would it be possible if you could not use so much pedal there?” He said, “Oh sure, sure.” I got a really positive response, so I kept going. So, after about an hour of this, I said, “You know, you are supposed to play this tomorrow. Are you sure you want to keep going with this?” He said, “Yes, keep going, I want to make this good.” So for two hours I kept making changes until we got it to the point where it worked. Then, he played beautifully.

The precision at the piano takes more work than any other instrument. I am not exactly sure why. I found it very hard to notate. “Do I put an accelerando here or a ritardando here?” I could not seem to get it right.

**JJ:** Do you feel like playing it yourself since you are also a pianist?

**JT:** It may be that. It may be that I have a particular way of playing the piece and if they don’t do it that way, then it’s not right.

**JJ:** I really like your overtones in *Vast Antique Cubes*. How did you find the overtones?

**JT:** I tried to give pitches a lot of registral and temporal space.

**JJ:** You used una corda in *Vast Antique Cubes*, correct?

**JT:** I leave that up to the player. You played it beautifully now that I remember.

**JJ:** It seems like *No Longer Very Clear* is so popular.

**JT:** *Or like a ...an Engine* came out separately with another volume. So everybody played that. I have heard *Vast Antique Cubes* and *Throbbing Still* played several
times. *Holding a Daisy* I don’t hear that much. But, then again, there are all these pianists all over the country and I don’t know what they are doing. They are not going to invite me to come to their universities to hear *Holding a Daisy*, which is such a short piece.

I went to one recital and I couldn’t get to the rehearsal. The performer was so nervous, he blew the piece. It was *Or like a... an Engine*. He just couldn’t play it. He was very nervous because I was there. Sometimes my presence just creates nerves, because I am the only one in the room who know what’s going on.

**JJ:** *No Longer Very Clear* and *Holding a Daisy*, how are the titles related to the pieces?

**JT:** Since I had this poem, I could take the words right out of the poem. It was an unusually nice thing to have because you usually have to think about a title without any help. I wrote the piece and then I picked the titles. They are pretty reflective except for *Holding a Daisy* which was a much subtler connection. The daisy you think of being very pretty, a nice flower. If you look at it really closely like Georgia O’Keefe’s did with her painting, it suddenly becomes something a little more threatening, a little more ominous. So, that’s the idea of *Holding a Daisy*. A daisy is not as simple as it looks.

**JJ:** Who influenced *Holding a Daisy*?

**JT:** I played a lot of piano repertoire and some composers stayed with me. Namely Stravinsky, Debussy, Beethoven. But never in a way that is terribly obvious because I don’t want them jumping out of the piece.

The idea of another composer jumping out of the piece is not a good thing. Because it means your listeners are stepping outside the piece into something else. That’s an issue we composers are faced with constantly. We are bound to use the music we love because everybody comes from somewhere. They don’t come from outer space. How do they use that music to create their own voice? That’s the problem all composers have.

**JJ:** Your pieces have such energetic power like scales and dynamics. Is this done on purpose?

**JT:** Yes, I am very interested in how a phrase motivates another phrase. How does the energy rise? How do the physics compel it? What is the fall out? That’s a big concern of mine.

**JJ:** Do you use an organic process?
JT: Yes, organic, no preconceptions except the instrument and the length. Is it a small piece, medium-size, or a big piece? Those are the big umbrellas before I start.

JJ: Could you explain your organic process?

JT: Well, I start with something. Sometimes I start with long notes, especially in my string and orchestra music. Then, I go from there. I sculpt and I listen carefully. “What is that trying to be? That is a character.”

It’s like writing a novel. You start with a character. The person works in a bank…he is kind of humorless. He is old and unhappy. You start with that; that’s the person. Then, that person starts to interact with some beautiful woman walking into the bank, a very together and ambitious woman. Then, these two start to affect each other. So this humorless boring person starts to get affected by this woman and starts to change and starts to, maybe, open up. Then, some other person comes into the picture. Then, there is that interaction.

It is a hard thing to map out because you are not sure from moment to moment how they are going to affect each other. It is the same thing with music, I think. You have to be a very good listener. Listen very carefully to your characters--who they are, what they are doing in relationship to each other and for how long. Because, unlike the novel, time plays a much bigger role in music.

It does play a role in the novel, but to me, not quite as big of a role as it does in music because in music you don’t have the meaning. You have a feeling, a pure aural landscape that has no particular meaning. Whereas in a novel, you have lots of meanings, symbols, representations. So, writing a novel, to me, is the closest analogy to writing a piece. That’s why it is organic. That’s why I don’t like to plan too far ahead because it’s in the continuity and details as to how this thing is going come out.

JJ: It seems like more freedom.

JT: Yes. It is a question of listening and a question of how much do you want to project to your audience? First to yourself, then to your performer, and then to an audience.

I think that there are three types of composers, actually. There is the kind of composer who really wants to communicate with their audience. I mean, it is absolutely essential that this thing is a living, breathing, vital profile and they want the audience to get it.
Then there is the type that says, “Well, I want to love this thing and be excited about it. But, you know, there are many kinds of listeners and I can’t control them. So, maybe they will come to me.”

Then the third type is, “I don’t care what the audience thinks. I am going to deliver my lecture. It is tough if they don’t like it.” There are basically those three kinds of composers. It has nothing to do with style, age, geography. It has to do with the individual’s relationship to communication.

JJ:  Which one are you?

JT:  What do you think?

JJ:  I think you communicate with audiences.

JT:  I think you communicate with audiences.

JJ:  I am in the first category, by far. John Harbison--he is another member of my generation, a pretty well known composer; he is in the second category. The third category, I would say, Babbitt, just to give examples.

JJ:  Did you start with an organic process when you wrote *Red Garnet Waltz*?

JT:  When I was young, I was very insecure like most composers. So I needed some maps. So I had a 12-tone map. I had the boxes. We were doing analysis in 12-tone theory. I didn’t understand but I tried. So, I have my little pitch map over here.

Basically, that’s how I got my pieces together. As time wore on, I started shredding the pitch maps. I started trying to develop my own pitch material intuitively, not conceptually, intuitively. That’s how I started to form my own organic process.

JJ:  The pieces seem to connect to each other. I found a lot of connections in your pieces with phrases, voice leading, rhythm. I really appreciate your idiomatic keyboard writing.

JT:  Thank you. When I was young pianist, I played a lot of contemporary music. I started to notice that certain pieces I could remember and other pieces I had no memory of. I started wondering what the difference was. The difference was that the ones I remembered were much stronger. They made more of an imprint on my memory. So that when I came back to them it took a week and then it was easy. The other ones, I had to start all over again because they did not make any memory or impact.

JJ:  Did you have any particular purpose for writing *Big Steps*?
JT: How did you know about that piece? Did I send you that piece?
JJ: Yes.
JT: O.K. You are one of the few people that know about that piece because it has not been published. It just kind of went into the atmosphere somewhere.

That was based on *Steps in the Snow* by Debussy. Except that, also, I was trying to get the young pianist to be aware of the range of the piano. Instead of going C, D, E, and I went C…D…E (gesturing). So, those were the big steps.

JJ: Whole tone scales?
JT: That is from Debussy.
JJ: It seems like a teaching piece, I thought.
JT: Yes, it is a teaching piece. It turns out it is for a little older person than I thought. I thought it would be fine for a nine year old, but it is more like a 14 year-old.
JJ: Do you have any plans to write more teaching pieces for children?
JT: You know, Bach did, of course, and Stravinsky, and Bartok, and a few others. I think it is a good idea to do.
JJ: Was it commissioned too, *Big Steps*?
JT: Yes, by Merkin Hall, a concert for children. A 14 year-old played the piece.
JJ: There are a lot of meter changes in *Holding a Daisy*. What is the reason for this?
JT: I use meter change just to deal with phrases, basically. Most of the meter changes are because of changes of phrases and changes of ideas.
JJ: In changing meter, I found a lot of repetition of rhythms. Do you want every down beat to have an accent when the meter changes?
JT: The downbeat should necessarily be brought out.
JJ: *Or like a...an Engine* is a virtuosic composition. Did you think of a Chopin *Etude*?
JT: There is only one part of the piece that could be called like Chopin, just the ending. There is some Bach in there.
JJ: Was *Or like a...an Engine* written first?
JT: Yes. *Or like a...an Engine*, then *Holding a Daisy*, then *Vast Antique Cubes* and then *Throbbing Still*.

JJ: Do you think it is a suite?

JT: Yes, but the pieces can be played singly. I prefer that *Vast Antique Cubes* goes with *Throbbing Still*.

JT: Or all four can be played in the order.

JT: There is a little Bartok thrown in there. *Rite of Spring* that goes through all of my music, Stravinsky.

JJ: Where are the Incan rhythms?

JT: There are in there. They are all over the place, but it is subtle. It is really subtle. There is also a Bartok reference all the time. *Contrasts* last movement by Bartok. *Rite of Spring* and *Petroushka* by Stravinsky.

JJ: Thank you.