

“Gabriel Kahane’s *Bradbury* Pieces as Popular and Derridean Deconstructions”

Gabriel Kahane (b. 1981) is a singer-songwriter and composer: he was a Sony recording artist for a time, regularly tours with the Punch Brothers, and has been commissioned as a composer for concert works by places like the Lincoln Center and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. His song “Bradbury (304 Broadway)” from his album *The Ambassador*, and his string quartet *Bradbury Studies* share a special relationship. In the program notes for *Studies*, Kahane writes that the quartet is a “loving deconstruction” of the song.

*Studies* is a deconstruction in a popular sense: it abstractly reconfigures elements of “Bradbury,” the original song. However, the pairing of the song and *Studies*, which I will refer to as the *Bradbury* pieces in this presentation, also comprises a Derridean deconstruction. Jacques Derrida (b. 1930 d. 2004) was a French-Algerian philosopher whose method of deconstruction involved undermining hierarchies. By examining two ideas grouped in a hierarchical binary (like speech/writing or nature/culture), he could disprove the premises of their stratified relationship, showing instead that the ideas are contained within each other. The *Bradbury* pieces together deconstruct the binary of concert and popular music. Deconstructing this binary is important to Kahane because, as he discusses in his writing and program notes, he sees it as too often dominating the popular discourse regarding new music, particularly its focus on genre-crossing at the expense of craft. The *Bradbury* pieces attempt to sideline this discourse and bring the focus back to the music, regardless of its genre.

Kahane’s 2014 singer-songwriter album *The Ambassador* is a cultural and architectural biography of his birthplace, Los Angeles. The second track, “Bradbury” is a musical portrait of the Bradbury Building, a building most famously featured in *Blade Runner*. He sings from the point of view of one of the film’s replicants, an intelligent humanoid robot designed to die before it develops emotions. The text discusses themes from the film like urban decay, anxiety about

obsolescence, and false memories. In Stanzas 7 and 8, Kahane reveals that the song is one large metaphor. In the text “Like me (a replicant), the dark city thinks its recall is its own, but have not its thoughts been suggested in the bone?”, he compares a replicant to Los Angeles itself. Perhaps if a city could approximate emotions and memories, it would ruminate on the same kinds of anxieties about obsolescence and death.

The central formal device in the song is the recontextualization of a constant pulse. By that, I mean that a pulse, namely 196 beats per minute, persists throughout the whole song, but the song moves to different tempos by means of juxtaposing polymeters beneath this pulse. I am using measure numbers from a transcription that Kahane’s publisher has graciously provided to me. While the song begins in 7/4 at 196 bpm, in m. 11, the left hand of the piano enters in a 4/4 meter occupying the same amount of time as the right hand’s 7/4. **PLAY** These polymeters delineate the form of the song, as outlined here.

In different interviews and in his program notes, Kahane variously describes *Studies* as a deconstruction, adaptation, and reexamination: all terms that fall under what I call “popular deconstruction”. I use “popular” to distinguish it from “Derridean” deconstruction. My definition of a popular deconstruction is a work that abstractly present elements of an original source, sometimes with large swaths of the original material unaltered, but also perhaps with interjections of new material. *Studies* is a popular deconstruction of “Bradbury.” It presents portions of the referent song unaltered, while also presenting fragmented elements of the song in different levels of abstraction away from their original appearances. *Studies* recontextualizes accompaniments, polymeters, melodies, and timbres from “Bradbury”. Then, gradually over the course of the piece, Kahane lets these separated and more abstract ideas coalesce into presentations of longer, less abstract, more coherent events from the song.

The opening accompaniment figure from the song, which I call **p** for pulse in my analysis is a motive that pervades *Studies*. Often he presents just the bottom line and the first four notes. The B, C#, E, F# comprise a [0257] pitch set that returns truncated, transposed, harmonized, and in new meters throughout the piece. I will play three other representative instances of **p** from *Studies*, and what you'll hear is that these three treatments become increasingly abstract, further from the literal presentation we just listened to. **PLAY** Kahane is clearly reconfiguring this motive throughout with different levels of abstraction away from the source, constituting my definition of a popular deconstruction of it.

The polymeter that outlines the formal sections of "Bradbury" features in *Studies* as well, but this polymeter doesn't outline form strictly like in the song. Instead, Kahane presents abstract polymetric ideas throughout *Studies*, including percussive measures of pitchless polymeter. **PLAY** Another featured song element is the melody of Chorus 2. **PLAY** The melody from this chorus occurs fragmented in several places in the piece. Take mm. 13-17, where you can hear this fragmented treatment of the melody we just heard. **PLAY**

In some moments, Kahane approximates timbres from the song, most notably his own voice. At times he instructs the violist to play: "stuttering, scratchy improvisation, with insane vibrato, Wild vibrato, unhinged". **PLAY** The result of these indications is a quirky cantabile effect that approximates the vibrato of Kahane's voice. Extended techniques throughout the piece approximate the effects pedals of guitars and other timbres present in the recording as well.

Kahane deconstructs "Bradbury" in *Studies* by populating the piece with abstract fragmented aspects of the song, but form plays a role in the deconstruction as well. He lets the fragments gradually coalesce into presentations of more coherent song events, creating

deconstruction across the piece's form. *Studies* is in four sections: two "launches" of the verse, a development, and the arrival of the song.

Each of the two launches involves three abstract statements of the verse, with the third statement sounding most like the song. Surrounding these statements are free material and previously-discussed fragments. The verse melody appears first in the cello, then again in the violin. These statements are disembodied, either obscured by length, accompaniment, or register. After a transition, the verse melody appears a third time in with **p** accompaniment and the cello outlining the original harmony, making it the least abstract. Now I will play a bit of each verse statement so you can hear the progression from obscure statements to clear, less-abstract ones. **PLAY**. Over the course of this launch, Kahane is experimenting with deconstruction on the formal scale, gradually revealing this least abstract version of the verse. This third verse statement is interrupted and then the second launch begins.

The second launch is analogous to the first, but this time around, Kahane reveals just a few seconds more of the verse. This gradual revelation of longer sections of the verse takes a detour in the development section. The motivic content of the material in the development is similar to the launches and continues to interact with free material. However, the free material is some of the most abstract and some of the wildest in the piece. Indications like microtonal playing, "wild improvisation", approximate pitch, and transitions labeled "Jump Cut" only happen in this section, meriting its characterization as a development.

The final section of the development (Mm. 256-291) returns to the large-scale formal plan of gradually revealing larger sections of the song. This section features **p** in unprecedented overlapping three-part counterpoint. Out of the thick texture of **p**'s, the least-abstract **p** emerges in the viola, setting up the arrival of the song. **PLAY**

In the arrival section, Kahane presents the least-abstract version of the song. Despite the presence of other free interrupting material in this section, he conveys a global sense of arrival by presenting large, unfragmented sections of the song as opposed to the smaller chunks in earlier sections. This version is still a deconstructed one, though: it is transposed, it includes extended techniques for noisy effects, and there are interruptions. Furthermore, the piece doesn't end like the song does, but rather with a strange coda, the original **p** returns insistently over chromatic harmonies and then ends on an E major chord. **PLAY THE TWO ENDINGS**

By ending this way, he drives the idea of deconstruction home. Bringing a literal **p** back over unheard harmonies shows his deft skill in presenting his material in new and interesting ways. We end conclusively, but not in the way we would expect.

On both the small and large scale, *Studies* is a popular deconstruction of "Bradbury". It fragments and reconfigures ideas from the song, then gradually reveals larger sections of it. Kahane doesn't specify in his writings if *Studies* is an attempt at a stricter philosophical notion of deconstruction, and I wanted to examine that. Steve Sweeney-Turner outlines the premise in an analysis of Peter Maxwell Davies' *Vasalii Icones*. He defines the hierarchy that Derrida aims to deconstruct. In a hierarchical binary, the higher-up term, the thesis, controls the binary. The antithesis or lower term only exists as a derivative shadow of the thesis. Derrida's aim was to discard the premise that the antithesis is only derivative of the thesis, and that instead, the thesis and antithesis are contained within each other: the hierarchy between the two ideas ceases, and what is left is an interplay of differences between two equal ideas. The loose idea of a method of deconstruction is a way of reading a text in three loose stages.

1. *engage*— learn the text on its own terms, figuring out what hierarchies are at play
2. *reverse*—use the text itself to turn the binary on its head

3. *displace*—reveal the terms of the binary to be grounded not on hierarchy, but rather just difference.

The *Bradbury* pieces together are Kahane’s attempt to deconstruct the hierarchical binary of concert and popular music. Our “extant text” is a popular understanding of the differences between concert music and popular music: Concert music takes the role of the educated, older, artistic thesis. Popular music emerges only in relief. Concert music is educated, with disjunct and ornate melodies in changing, asymmetrical meters played by acoustic instruments in a live setting. Popular music, as a result, is uneducated, featuring simple melodies in straight-ahead meters played by guitars and drums with amplification and studio effects on a recording.

The act of composition of these pieces makes up the *engage* stage. Kahane engages the popular understanding of the concert/popular binary by composing both an unequivocal string quartet and song that fit comfortably in their places. As if throwing a wrench into a machine, though, the *Bradbury* pieces feature gestures and ideas that *reverse* the binary and ultimately *displace* its hierarchical structure. Kahane “elevates” the song with concert ideas—interesting subject matter, poetic use of rhyme and polymeter make the song more “concert”-y—while “lowering” *Studies* by having it quote and revolve around a rock song. Any trace of hierarchy between concert and popular music in his work effectively disappears.

The melodies of “Bradbury,” when juxtaposed with changing polymeters, sound more complicated and in the vein of concert music. This same melody’s arrival in *Studies* sounds simple and clear, a break from the fragmentation before it. The melodic and metric gestures in the pieces belong in both worlds showing that these two worlds are actually just one.

Kahane most powerfully enacts the reversal of the concert-popular hierarchy through timbre. While “Bradbury” *should* only have guitars, drums, and keyboards, the “popular”

instruments, the string arrangements throughout bring it closer to our timbral impression of concert music. Studies contributes in the reversal through timbre through extended techniques. The noisy, scraping sounds end up approximating the distortion of guitars and other studio effects. The Bradbury pieces both occupy an unexpected liminal space in the middle of our hierarchy. Kahane puts both pieces in this space, displacing the supposed hierarchy between the genres. Instead, the two genres exist on equal footing, with all music existing in the middle, simply defined by the differences between them as opposed to any hierarchical structure.

Another implication of the deconstruction of the concert/popular binary is that the composer/singer-songwriter binary gets deconstructed as well. Instead of a model where the composer lords over the songwriter, with songwriting taking up any area that composition doesn't claim for itself, Kahane proposes that these two roles are one in the same, both serving the act of simply creating music.

Kahane has expounded online about his objections to genre as the end-all concept for journalists: they often characterize new music as a hybrid of styles and end the discussion there. Kahane objects because, virtually all music is a hybrid. Labeling both Sufjan Stevens and Ligeti as *genre-hoppers* conveys nothing about the artists themselves and sidelines discussions of quality. The more important way to characterize these hybrids is to discuss their skill and musical result. He continues: "...all these hyphenated-descriptor-laden genre conversations [are] alienating to a lot of listeners. If you describe your work as "art pop song", you threaten to drive away listeners who may not think they're sophisticated enough to like "art" music...If we just call it songwriting, there's a better chance that more listeners will give it a chance than if we silo the thing as "art song" or "chamber pop" or what-have-you." Exclusive focus on genre or how eclectic music is doesn't just muddle conversation, it has the power to turn people away entirely.

Many modern discussions of genre assume that eclecticism in modern music is an explicit process. However, hybridization in music doesn't stem from the overt desire to take one idea from one genre, one from another, and push them together. Instead, musicians increasingly live in a world where all music exists together on equal footing, and they draw on whatever elements fit the music they are trying to make in the moment. The emphasis isn't on hybridity, but on craft. Less "Eclectic", more, "Is it good?" Perhaps, following Kahane's example, we can start to think and write about other music with this in mind as well.