

שמות (shemot)

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[This informal essay was written for Bob Gilmore, to answer some questions about a few of my piece titles, specifically, "ivtoo," the word "tood," and the tooaytoods. I took the occasion to answer not just about those titles, but about my titles in general. Thanks to Bob, for asking.]

Signifying ("Give it a name!")

Names liberate, enslave, reify, delineate, distinguish, embolden, demonstrate, confuse. They suggest, remind, lead to, come from and wake us from dreams. Like music, they are meaningless and endlessly meaningful. And not burdened by meaning, their meanings can be inspected playfully without any hope of success.

In American Sign Language, and I believe, in other signs, *name-signs*¹ are distinguished by two things: marked (unusual, difficult) handshapes; and body or sign-space positions unusual to conventional signs. Often, in conversation, when a name-sign appears, one knows that it is not a regular sign from these cues. The sign might convey some information about its human subject (perhaps: "has long hair," a "big nose," "smiles," name begins with "J"). But that's all. The name-sign might have no specific meaning whatsoever, or more likely, its original connotation might be lost, forgotten, or out of use, like, Miller, or Cohen. Great song names ("Blood-Strained Banders," "FFV") are like that: highly marked yet penumbral remnants of a historical moment that might be sometime understood (the latter) or never (the former). Yet they give the song a second musical mode, a mode of language.

Each composer develops his own quirky, sometimes functional, sometimes obfuscatory titular habits. From simply numbering string quartets or player piano pieces to more or less arbitrary sampling of some source (like my *The Time is Now, ...slippers of steel...*, *... approaching the azimuth...*, and others, all drawn in order from one book-length Melody Sumner poem; or my use of Hebrew titles for the *Cantillation*

¹ A name-sign is a specific sign, only locally known, that is a person's name in ASL.

Studies, extracting, in standard practice, the title from the first word of the parsha), our names serve a variety of purpose.

Titles list. “This is my 14th four voice canon,” (so: “it refers to, builds on, emanates from, negates, improves upon, fills in the gaps of, pokes fun at, completes, and continues the first 13”).

Titles connect. The name of my *freeHorn* canon (#23) says that this is the 23rd of a series of pieces, but that it also is part of the set of pieces based on *freeHorn*, software almost eponymous with the pieces performed in it². The software is a generalization of the ideas in an earlier piece, *Psaltery*, which is also the name of a set of pieces emanating from it. Different performances of *freeHorn* have slightly different names. The word *freeHorn* itself comments on one of the later *Psaltery*³ pieces. The title *freeHorn* contains as well, more than a few puns connecting it to its older sibling (*Horn*), bespeaking its current manifestation, and even a pair of gentle jibes at funny moment in American political history and a good friend. Most of these meanings, of course, are best left as palimpsests. If all the suggestions of a title were known, we’d have evaporation, not evanescence.

They suggest. *Preamble* (the first of *for jim, ben and lou*) is formally, something like a prelude, or an alap, or a pathetan. But *Preamble* carries connotations, specifically American, that these other words do not.⁴ The piece is not, in fact, a prelude to anything. Spelling and word choice suggest cultural associations, maybe even cultural biases or agendas, without, I fear having the courage (or more kindly, interest) to be polemical. So

² Such as my generic title “The World’s Longest Melody” (*TWLM*), which refers to, originally, a simple but powerful theoretical melodic algorithm first published in a set of pieces called *Distance Musics* (“The World’s Longest Melody” for David Feldman, in *Perspectives of New Music*). *Distance Musics* are themselves part of a general set of pieces about morphology and morphogenesis. *TWLM* and which then became the name of software (several generations of it) and several pieces of radically different form: *The World’s Longest Melody (Ensemble)*; *The World’s Longest Melody (Haiga for John Bischoff and Evangel King)*; *The World’s Longest Melody Piano Studies* (on the *Hallways* CD), the latter extracted from a series of long solo live computer improvisation performances also called *TWLM* (and themselves refer titularly to some convoluted but good-hearted idea of gender influence as well as the music of Henry Cowell); the final piece of *for jim, ben and lou*, which uses the algorithm in conjunction with some more complicated harmonic ideas.

³ The set includes *Psaltery*, *Cello*, *Canon for Flute*, *Flutes*, *Horn*, *Choir*, *freeHorn* (and variations) and many other pieces that use the “psaltery” harmonic idea (harmonic series replacement, “prime order”).

⁴ Given predilections, I might have called this the “prelud,” or, heaven help me, the “prey-“ or “prayload.” One of the rare times I had the rare good sense to say: “those look stoopid.” *Preamble*, parenthetically, like pieces such as *ivt*, *ivtoo*, and a number of others, also uses a kind of “psaltery-form,” combined with something like a rhythmicana idea.

Phantasy/Fantasy (as in Schoenberg) has (a) suggested meaning(s), one(s) that we may guess at, never know. This is preferable. The most efficient route to paratact: economy.

They proclaim literacy, poesy (if often feigned). Like some kind of game of intellectual whack-a-mole, titles give composers a rare opportunity to use words, their own. To make little poems. Choosing those words, we self-identify (“cop a tood” as it were), connect to historical traditions. (Each of the titles in my *30 Rounds, MacDowell Diary*, self-consciously echos the cadences of our shape-note tradition). We demonstrate our competence as punsters, polymaths, polyglots, historians, prophets, romantics, literati, or all of the above. For one moment (that, encapsulated, lives forever) we are clever, smarmy, tongue-in-cheek, sentimental, obscure, foolish, brilliant, reflective, scholarly, dopey — all in ways that others, others who use *language*, might understand. A temporary respite, maybe, from the perpetual and paradisiacal damnation of meaningless that is music. Coming up for air.

They simply describe. Not just the piece (*Four Voice Canon #5, Three Pieces for Two Pianists*), but what the piece is. Titles like *old paint, Lonesome Road, Ladies Auxiliary, Five Shaker Songs, Another You, Will You Miss Me, Eskimo Lullaby, Dismission of Great I, Sweet Betsy from Pike*, (the latter three the “songs” of *Songs and Tood*, a solo guitar piece that except for *Eskimo Lullaby*, has not yet been performed) and others plagiarize the songs they set. Others minimally describe form — *22 Sounds, 51 Melodies, 34 Chords (Christian Wolff in Hanover and Royalton), “The Historical Tuning Problem”* (from *Songs and Toods*), *17² Chords, Simple Actions, 17 Simple Melodies of the Same Length* — homologically (in that the piece describes itself). Dedicatory pieces — *abetoods, miwakotood, for jim ben, and lou, Casten Variation, edtoods, dannytoods, noratood, terrytoods, Toon and Jutta Live in Antwerp* — fall somewhere in this category, but are of course, less nuanced. In description, titles can say too much or too little. But these are, by nature, elliptical. The composer gets that for free. *Four Childrens’ Songs* is either completely descriptive, or not at all. Or both.

They are poetic. A non-functional, imagistic title is located, conjured, stolen, patched together, maybe as a last resort. Often a personal, encrypted, non-understood message, private joke, hope maintained at high remove — *Epitaph (tmfg), Πtood, #[DoWhat?AllYes/No?(ok)Back], !tearrimedis* — or perhaps something about which the composer is not all that clear about (of which there are a great many examples in my own work).

Which is all to say: things get complicated. Composers build odd and different worlds in their heads, worlds that make no sense in any sense that we can say something makes sense. Nicely, confusingly, composers are accountable to no one in the governance of these worlds. What follows are a few clues to the administration of a few small principalities in my own nominal anarchist state.

toods and noomerals

I often use the word “tood” in my pieces. This began, I believe, in 2002 with the *k-toods* for two pianos. It seemed a useful and indigeneous orthographical construction for a certain compositional, cultural, personal impetus. Not a translation of “etude” into the language of the (my) new world, it’s not exactly not a study either. Mostly, like studies, my *toods* concentrate on a specific formal idea (but so does much of the rest of my work). Often they are small, occur in sets (or not). Sometimes, as in the *interloods* from *Three Pieces for Two Pianists*, or more explicitly, in *Songs and Toods*, I use the word to distinguish one type of compositional activity from another within the same piece. I don’t exactly how the word entered my musical lexicon, but when it did, it began to provide yeoman’s service. When there is no word for what we do, as Lewis Carroll points out, we just invent one. And by definition, there is never a word for music. But I like the sound, the feel, and the possibilities of this one.

Other times, I use it in punning dedication (*lissatoods*, *glockentood*, *poojatood*, *tooguitartood*, *Sunday Organ Piece for Hans*, *toontood*), or to group pieces (*onceatoods*, *tooaytoods*). The subtitle for *Ontslaan* (*toontood*), connects this piece to a series of other pieces (beginning with the *Dismission* (*pianotoods*), where I began to use the computer technique.^{5,6} The *Dismission* (*pianotoods*) are themselves related to real-life events, and a fascination with American musical connections arising from one of the songs in *Songs and Toods*).

Many of my titles are multi-lingual (Hebrew, Spanish, hacker-speak, lately, ASL). I’m not entirely sure why, perhaps something to do with the necessity and the futility of translation. Or a kind of echo of what my own brain often sounds like. Or of leaving things alone that are fine when left alone. Or of not recognizing distinctions, and noting

⁵ Other pieces that use this technique are the second of the *Three Pieces for Two Pianists*, and “Prayer for the Nations” from במדבר (*B’midbar*)(*Numbers*) (there is also a piece in ASL in במדבר).

⁶ But also, unapologetically, invokes the phonic silliness of my own initial mispronunciation of my friend’s name (thus, it’s not “toontood,” but “tonetood”).

that it's better to not know something and learn it than to not recognize something and ignore it.

I generally leave Hebrew titles alone, rendering unto grandpa Louie that which is grandpa Louie's. In Π tood and $\text{׳ר׳ט} \text{tood}$ (*tooaytood* #16b) (one of the interloods from *Three Pieces...*), I use a kind of jewmerican creole, which comes all too naturally to me (even, when careless, in conversation). *Haiga: Duet* (ב׳ג׳) for *Ellen and Dan*, is more extreme, using multi-lingualistic puns that include mathematical ideas with the goal of creating an impossible-to-solve cryptic that will stump a brilliant mathematician fluent in Hebrew.⁷ In $\text{אל} \text{הט} \text{אל}$ (*al het*) (*for the people of Nicaragua*), two languages suggested themselves via the nature of the piece (I wrote the text in Spanish)—each emerged for reasons that had not much to do, in fact, with language. In $\text{רוע} \text{פלאץ}$ (*Rue Platz*), the second piece of *for jim, ben and lou*, the Hebrew, is of course, a secretive transliteration of the Yiddish, a more critical crypticality that I, by the grace of fate, didn't have to invent.

In similar creolery, I often use computerese symbols (*!Δ, a birthday round for Michael Byron; in re: !tofurkey; !tearrimedis*) as a shorthand (!, pr. “bang,” for “not,” or negation).

For some years, beginning with *ivt* (pr. “forty”, a birthday present), I've used other, quirkier cross-linguistic/numerical shorthands. Thus, *ivtoo* (pr. “fortyto”) is compositionally related to its predecessor (a harmonic/rhythmic/canonic scheme, dating back to *Psaltery*). *vfty* (pr. “fifty”), however, is not related (part of the “all things...” series, which explores morphing thru statistical “modes”).

These nominal devices are both related to and completely unrelated to the two guitar pieces *ii-v-i* and *toovviiivfor*. The former is straightforward, that is the chord progression. The second is less so. Pronounced, perhaps, “t(w)(o)o five six for four,” it is an orchestration of *ii-v-i* for quartet, using a different, equally simple chord sequence. Other pieces, like *iiivxii* (*tooaytood* #13), *iiiviv joan* (*tooaytoods* #14) combine self-description and meta-self-description freely, with marginal possibilities for decipherability (at times, even to me).

⁷ One title, *almost a quintet (sounding), twice before gone, sadly giving up (8)*, is actually a cryptic crossword clue.

In the *tooytoods* a system of reasonably clear rivulets are confluent to a big muddy mess, in which I occasionally find myself more than waist deep. Each *tooytood* is two seconds long — there are perhaps 25 or 30 of them now (in different sets: for piano, solo violin, 12 cellos, string quartet). The first 11, written for piano (and a few also arranged for guitars), have individual titles, formally indicative. The first is foundational: “less than or equal to two.” The second is the first’s referential complement — “*that* thing in the opposite direction,” — and the third its cousin “not *that*.” Embedded in each *tooytood* title is some key to the formal idea.

tooytood #4, pronounced “88 in 2” giddily proclaims membership in a club whose member composers have all employed this idea at least once. My good friends David Mahler and Christian Wolff have made two beautiful examples, and my own *onceatoods* methodically and elaborately orchestrate this same simple device. Some of the *interloods* from the *Three Pieces*... continue this dubious but doggedly noble lineage: *viiitviiiiniivii* (*tooytood* #15a) and *viiitviiiiniivii(ii)ivgp* (*tooytood* #15b) (pro. “88 in 2 for 2” and “88 in 2 for 2 (2) for gp” respectively, the latter dedicated to my friend and neighbor Grace Paley, who passed away while I was writing the piece).