Several years ago, I attended The Percussive Arts Society National Convention. There I witnessed a ninety-minute clinic on state of the art techniques for playing crash cymbals. I confess that there was something humorously esoteric about the event, but I left inspired to imagine particular ways to coax sound out of pieces of wood, metal and skin instead of simply hitting things. It also woke me to the fact that the first step in writing for percussion is to invent the instrument and a playing technique. Percussionists tend to have an adventurous attitude about this: if they can reach it with an arm or leg, or hold it in the mouth it is fair game. I’m fascinated by the one-man-band mentality of juggling contrasting timbres produced by a gamut ranging from finely crafted instruments to kitchen utensils, and hobby shop paraphernalia.

In addition to providing a virtuoso "vehicle" for the percussionist, *Micro-Concerto* also explores a variety of more complex roles that the individual can play in relation to the ensemble. In movement I: Chords and Fangled Drum Set, the rhythm is front and center. I imagine that the piano chords harmonize the rhythm instead of the rhythm measuring the harmonies. Movement II: Interlude #1 Vibes Solo, is a short, lyrical ballad. In Movement III: Click, Clack, Clank, the percussionist is neither an accompanying rhythm section nor leading melody. I think of it as a contextualizing and interpreting narration spoken in some imaginary tongue clicking language. In Movement IV: Interlude #2 Marimba and Cello, the two instruments are completely co-dependent; the story is told only by their interplay. In some sense, they are a single instrument with timbres no more disparate than the clickers and samba whistle that are part of the percussionist’s instrument in movement III. This movement flows without pause into movement V: Tune in Seven. In the first half of the movement the percussionist is one of six players tossing around a set of variations on the Tune. Toward the end the percussionist returns to the “fangled drum set” and shifts the focus back to what must be (along with singing) the most fundamental form of musical expression—hitting things in time.

The two interludes are played on big, standard pieces of percussion “furniture,” but the main movements focus on small moves and subtle distinctions. They are full of fussy descriptions of how to play some hand-held “toy” just so. This micro-management of small muscle groups, and the fact that the concerto soloist is accompanied by the smallest orchestra imaginable, suggested the title. *Micro-Concerto* was commissioned by a Meet the Composer grant for the New York New Music Ensemble, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and the California E.A.R Unit.
Having scoured the mean streets and back alleys of this godforsaken part of town, our hero stumbles on the hideout of the underworld kingpin responsible for kidnapping his gal. His aim: negotiate her release, hopefully without incident. Impressed by his moxie, the mob-boss relents, but under certain conditions: the man must walk out, unarmed, with his girlfriend following at a distance. Under no circumstances is he to turn back until he leaves the gang’s turf.

It is here our story begins – with the fatal error. Sensing a setup, our hero panics and grabs the girl’s arm in what will prove a doomed attempt to flee on his own terms. Stunned, the mob pursues the pair through the nooks and crannies of this dank quarter. Eventually the band of thugs gains ground on the frantic, exhausted couple, overtakes them and exacts a horrible vengeance.

The music of *Ballistic Etude 3.1* is cast in the form and style of a caccia (It.) or chace (Fr.), 14th century genres commonly associated with the hunt. Though the work is mostly clearly “ballistic” in the sense of going ballistic, it represents a study of flight as well as an exploration of myth and film noir. Interestingly, the term has its roots in the Greek word diaballein and the associated diabolus (in musica) familiar to musicians in general and composers in particular.

The work is dedicated to the memory of composer William Albright, a gifted, orphic figure pursued by his own demons. *Ballistic Etude 3.1* was named the overall winner of Latitude 49’s 2016 Call for Scores, and has been arranged by the composer himself for this specific instrumentation.

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*Number Nine* is inspired by the Beatles’ *Revolution 9*, their collage-like, musique-concrète-inspired, aural depiction of a revolution, positioned on the climactic point of the White album. Inspired by the looped phrase “number nine,” “number nine,” “number nine,” etc. at the beginning of the Beatles’ song, I began my Number Nine with the instrumental version of that repeated phrase, and the rest of the piece evolves from its rhythmic and pitch contour. I also incorporated other *Revolution 9* references, weaving their collage fragments into my more continuously evolving arc. Number Nine was commissioned by the percussionist/composer Ted Babcock for his program Machine in the Garden and premiered in January 2014 at the Curtis Institute of Music.

I have a quasi-religious relationship to Chopin’s *Ballades*. If I stumble on one of them unexpectedly–on the radio, or walking past a pianist’s practice room–I have to stop and sit down. Years ago, I commuted with the *Ballades* to such a degree that now I almost fear them; I go near them only when I’m suitably prepared for that kind of extended deep-sea diving. Of all Chopin’s *Ballades*, I was most affected by the Fourth. I’d read that Chopin wanted the Fourth to have a “sickly, creepy” feeling, which reminded me of an interview I’d read with Thom Yorke in which he’d said that the goal of Radiohead’s “OK Computer” had been to make the listener feel “emotionally nauseated.” In both cases these characterizations struck me as poignantly apt. I realized as I was writing this piece in a mood of the first movement is cut off quickly. Summer in Umbria is hot and dry and always ends of nowhere. I used the sound of this rainstorm to create the same effect in my interludes in Double Happiness. The first interlude features the rainstorm and my transcription of four church bells heard of the piece was inspired by a summer spent in Italy while I was a fellow at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation’s castle in Umbria. I spent a lot of my time in Italy collecting field recordings of the Italian countryside, the sounds of church bells, train stations, and rainstorms. All of these sounds eventually found their way into Double Happiness as I constructed an emotional narrative around the sounds I experienced.

The piece consists of three larger movements connected by two (almost) identical interludes. The first movement, “Self Portrait, Part I,” explores the simple repetition of four simple notes, obsessive in their melancholy. The movement ends on an optimistic note as the four repeated notes slowly transform into a downward moving chorale that leads inexorably to a celebratory D major chord. The mood of the first movement is cut off quickly. Summer in Umbria is hot and dry and always ends quite abruptly with a long and extreme rain storm that cuts the heat; unexpectedly it’s autumn out of nowhere. I used the sound of this rainstorm to create the same effect in my interludes in Double Happiness. The first interlude features the rainstorm and my transcription of four church bells heard ringing asynchronously in the distance.

If the first Self Portrait explores extremes of melancholy, the third movement, “Self Portrait, Part II” is an extreme study in joy, ecstatic joy that comes from the feeling of creation itself—the feeling can be almost as uncontrollable as melancholy. The third movement features a field recording of a rhythmic train station bell coupled with the percussionist playing a simple and very rhythmical melody over and over again, augmented with resonant and microtonal electronics, giving the whole movement an extremely bright, metallic sheen. The third movement cuts off as quickly as the first and we once again have an interlude. The second interlude is more austere than the first with the transcription of a simple and extraordinarily resonant church bell ringing against the chords of the piano and the rainstorm again. The final movement, “New Year’s Song (for Sarah)” tries to find a place of repose between the two extremes. The movement is in fact a simple song where the two performers play a long, sustained melody against their own sustained chords. A brief moment of electronics features the composer himself playing violin, and accordion. The movement ends gently, sustainedly, and I would hope happily.

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**Program**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number Nine (2013)</th>
<th>Gabriella Smith</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ballade (2000)</td>
<td>Sarah Kirkland Snider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thread and Fray (2006)</td>
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**Program Notes**

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*Thread and Fray,* commissioned by the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble of the Aspen Music Festival, weaves a single, middle-register melody through an increasingly fragmented musical landscape.

**Double Happiness** was written in the fall of 2012 for percussion and guitar, and recently arranged for Latitude 49’s pianist and percussionist in 2016. While the piece was composed in New York, much of the piece was inspired by a summer spent in Italy while I was a fellow at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation’s castle in Umbria. I spent a lot of my time in Italy collecting field recordings of the Italian countryside, the sounds of church bells, train stations, and rainstorms. All of these sounds eventually found their way into Double Happiness as I constructed an emotional narrative around the sounds I experienced.

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