

Statement of Academic Purpose  
Princeton University / PhD in Music Composition

To Princeton's composition faculty—

I'm grateful for the chance to apply to the PhD in Music Composition at Princeton. Attending Princeton has been an aspiration for much of my professional life, and I've come to appreciate how unique it is among the world's music institutions.

Over the past decade, I've spent five years in school (University of Michigan for both degrees) and five out. I've dedicated myself to the production of shows featuring experimental and new music in the Midwest. Writing for these shows, I focus on much more than just musical craft and content. I try to craft an experience with specific places in mind, specific architectures, specific times of the year and of the day. Most importantly, I write for the specific communities that have given my work meaning through years of attention and support.

Above all else, I believe music is for healing. I want to live in a society in which composers write music that heals and enlivens the human communities around them, in which citizens have deeply integrated concertgoing into their lives. My work looks toward a future where community building and place-making, oft-overlooked facets of composition, are the very core of what we as composers do.

We all use music to heal in some respects. Music has profound power to alter consciousness, sometimes stirring older, deeper forms of listening within us. My favorite composers use this power to soothe afflictions specific to the modern psyche; in so doing they ask great things of our patience and attention. At its best, music imparts the same awe and stillness one gets looking out over a Great Lake or vast canyon. Both experiences give space to piece together fractured shards of our attention, and to get lost in the vastness of one, big thing.

The medium itself of live performance has many times thawed me out from the social isolation that characterizes modern American life. The concert—beautiful, wasteful, unproductive—is a joyous rebellion against capitalism and the alienation it produces. The concert gathers people not as workers, not as

tribe or family unit, but as members of a heterogeneous community, of a human ecosystem. Through my work, I aspire to care for and strengthen these ecosystems. I practice music, not law or medicine or social science, because live performance is one of the best tools we have to enact this care. I feel it is how I might contribute most to building a more humane world.

I have put these values into action with two main projects. In recent years, I've dedicated myself to building up the Regenerate! Orchestra (founded by myself) and the Third Place Musicfest (founded by a friend and for which I serve as assistant director) in Ann Arbor. The former presents orchestra music, the latter chamber music, both built on a reconsidered social foundation. Both are dedicated to activating and strengthening local community bonds. Both make shows as inviting and approachable as possible. Every time a traditionalist would chose formality, ritual, and disconnection, we choose approachability, spontaneity, and egalitarianism. Through these projects, we have cultivated a small but dedicated audience in and around Michigan who support this work.

These projects over the past few years have been the most fulfilling of my musical career, and they lead me to center music composition in my plans for the future. Studies at Princeton appear the best way to do this centering, and to bring my medium-term goals into reach.

Foremost, I wish to continue growth as a musician, artistically and professionally. Writing music is the backbone of my life and I absolutely must find a way to do it more, with fewer distractions. Keeping up my creative practice while paying the bills and staying healthy has left me scattered and exhausted. (I do assorted engraving, design, and copywork as a freelance day job.) I crave the room and stability I need to focus. I have long respected and been inspired by the diverse and challenging work of Princeton's faculty, and the chance to grow and develop under your mentorship excites me.

I've taught classes for more or less the past six years, and it has been deeply fulfilling work. It makes me feel useful to others— a feeling sometimes hard to come by as a musician! I've had many rewarding connections with adult students, and their feedback leads me to count teaching as one of my strengths. I eventually want a job teaching music at the collegiate level.

A PhD from Princeton would put me in a strong position applying to jobs, but I'd also benefit from time and resources to sharpen a coherent perspective

from which to teach. Writing a dissertation would be perfect scaffolding to deepen my thought on contemporary music practice and strengthen my skill as a communicator.

At the open house, an enrolled student asked why I was applying to few other schools. The truth is, I don't always see a place for myself in composition departments. I value a big-picture perspective on music, and I'm often discouraged by the myopia that sometimes characterizes academic music. Meeting the community at Princeton and hearing current students's work showed me I could absolutely fit in here. The students appear to place genuine value on community, intellectual diversity, and the interpersonal side of music-making. They also seem like a great group of people!

I know I have much to give and even more to learn from Princeton faculty and students alike. If accepted, I would strive to be a kind and generous community member, to approach my education with humility and curiosity of mind, and to work hard. I am centrally aware of how much I have yet to learn and eagerly crave new and challenging points of view. Acceptance to this program would be the greatest honor and opportunity of my professional life, and I would work every day to make the most of it.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my application. I hope we can get to know each other in person in the future— until then, be well!

— J. Clay Gonzalez