

Spring 2023

Direct Sensory Input, No Complications & A Token of His Grace

Vigilance JW Brandon
Bard College

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Direct Sensory Input, No Complications & A Token of His Grace

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts of Bard College

by
Vigilance J.W. Brandon

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

I would like to discuss my projects in two parts. The first, regarding my fall semester project, “Direct Sensory Input, No Complications,” or “D.S.I.N.C.” The second, regarding my spring semester project, “A Token of His Grace.” Both of these projects engage with subtle concepts which are deeply meaningful to me—they are connected, but also distinct, standalone projects.

Direct Sensory Input, No Complications

“D.S.I.N.C.” was an endeavor in arranging for live musicians and live performance. I wrote for trombone, tenor saxophone, trumpet/flugelhorn, piano, upright bass, and drums. In any creative endeavor, I have found it effective to utilize limitations and rules in order to instigate a flow of ideas. For this project I set myself the rule of using only acoustic sounds (excepting a small bass amp), as well as limiting myself to only those six instruments/musicians which I had selected prior to the beginning of the semester. The music writing process took place over several months, beginning in the summer, continuing all the way until a week or so before my concert.

During writing, I received invaluable feedback from my advisor, Erica Lindsay, on arranging my parts, as well as what to actually write. The writing process was both intuitive (and therefore mysterious in some sense) but also explicitly focused on the theme of the project; in a nutshell, D.S.I.N.C. seeks to express the capacity of music to serve as a telepathic language, communication beyond words or images. To me, music is a highly elevated, deeply spiritual phenomenon that unites our bodies, our intellects, and our souls, and connects us beyond our physical beings. I wanted to immerse the musicians and the audience in this exchange with “no complications,” which was part of the inspiration for the limitations I set myself, as well as the

presentation of the concert, which included a white and black dress code, white and black poster for promotion, and no introduction until the last piece of the concert.

I also experimented with the relationship between audience and performer, further seeking to express unity and reciprocal communication. I did this by having the rhythm section (bass, drums, and piano) at one end of the hall, and the horn section opposite them. The audience was seated in two halves, facing each other, and seated between the rhythm section and the horn section, leaving the middle of the room empty. The goal of this was to blur the lines between listener/performer. I have long wanted to escape the trappings of this dichotomy, and considering how effective it felt in this project, it is certainly something I want to continue exploring.

A Token of His Grace

The conceptual seed from which this album has grown is an excerpt from “The Seven Valleys,” a mystical, poetic treatise on the soul’s eternal journey through seven realms of being, written by Bahá’u’lláh, prophet and founder of the Bahá’í faith:

“These journeys have no visible ending in this temporal world, but the detached wayfarer— should invisible confirmation descend upon him and the Guardian of the Cause assist him—may traverse these seven stages in seven steps, nay rather in seven breaths, nay even in a single breath, should God will and desire it.” (Bahá’í Reference Library, 15)

I have kept this stanza in mind throughout the process of making this album, and it has served as a constant source of inspiration. To distill the intent of the project, I would say that it seeks to express some of those aspects of our human experience which are mystical, mysterious, ineffable, and infinite, and to guide the listener on a journey analogous to that of the soul through the “seven valleys.” In a way, these themes do not really make this project unique, since I see every

musical project as an opportunity to deal with some aspect of these concepts. There is always an underlying awareness of the freedom, sanctity, and power that comes with approaching music as a language in its own right.

As with D.S.I.N.C., I set myself some goals and limitations for the album to catalyze the creative process. I decided from the beginning I would have no sung lyrics, as a direct departure from past musical habits of mine and a continuation of the instrumentals of D.S.I.N.C. I also decided to aim for seven songs, to reprocess some of the recordings from D.S.I.N.C. as recycled material, and to collaborate more than I usually do on my recorded projects. All of these goals were intended to push me out of my comfort zone, and provoke creative decision making.

The writing and recording process has been ongoing and exploratory. It has involved creating ambient soundbeds using live recordings and Max patches, layered with improvisations and preconceived melodic and textural ideas. Something I have emphasized to all of my wonderful collaborators is my preference for everything they contribute to be intentional and “heard.” What I did not want was for me to insist on them contributing a layer or part that they themselves were not also hearing as a valuable or necessary contribution. Most of the time, something that I felt was needed or would improve the music was also heard by the collaborator, but not always—in these instances I decided to let the idea go. In this way, the project is not solely a product of “my” vision or “my” desires, but instead a negotiation and collaboration with everyone who contributed something of their own. This further explores the theme of unity, by avoiding hard and fast distinctions between performer, creator, and listener.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first and foremost thank my advisors for my senior year, Erica Lindsay and Matt Sargent, for their insight and encouragement. I would also like to extend this thanks to Sarah Hennies for her wisdom and encouragement as a member of my board this year.

I would like to thank my teacher Greg Glassman for being a wonderful mentor and trumpet player, for helping me to improve greatly, and for helping me develop my relationship to my horn.

I would like to thank all of my amazing friends and peers that collaborated with me on my senior projects: Steven Bonacci, Ameya Natarajan, Justin Geyer, Michael Knox, Rodney Clark, Rea Abel, Juan Diego Mora, Symonne Reid, Cherry Wu, CeDaniel Sumpter, Matthew An, and Jackson Spargur.

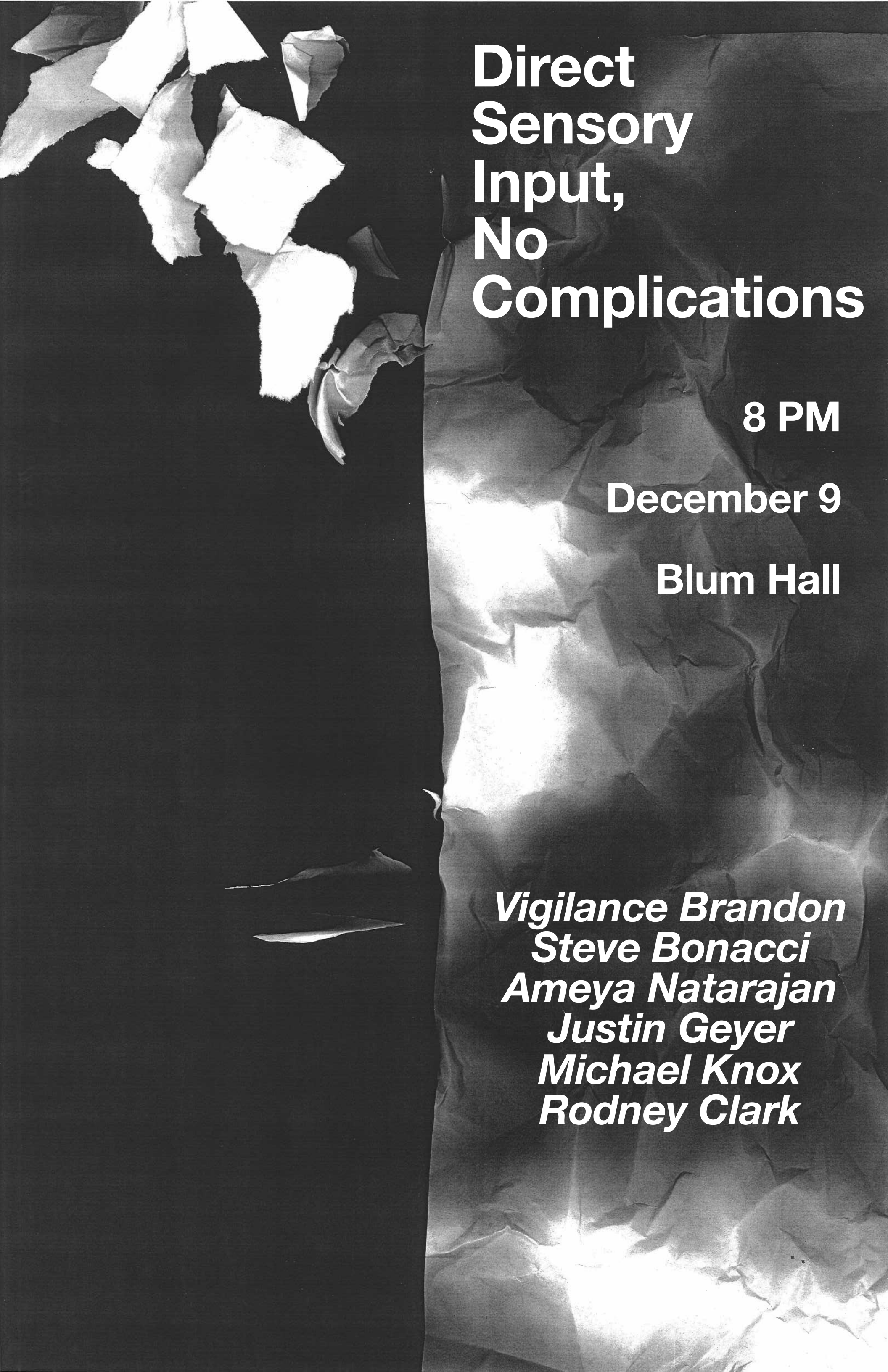
I would like to thank Tom Mark and John DiMarco for their tireless assistance in all things musical here at Bard. I would also like to extend this gratitude to the rest of the musical faculty, who have always been so gracious and helpful during my musical journey here.

Finally, I would like to thank my dear friends and family. Thank you for all that you do.

Much Love

Sources

1. Bahá'u'lláh. "Bahá'í Reference Library." The Call of the Divine Beloved | Bahá'í Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/call-divine-beloved/>.



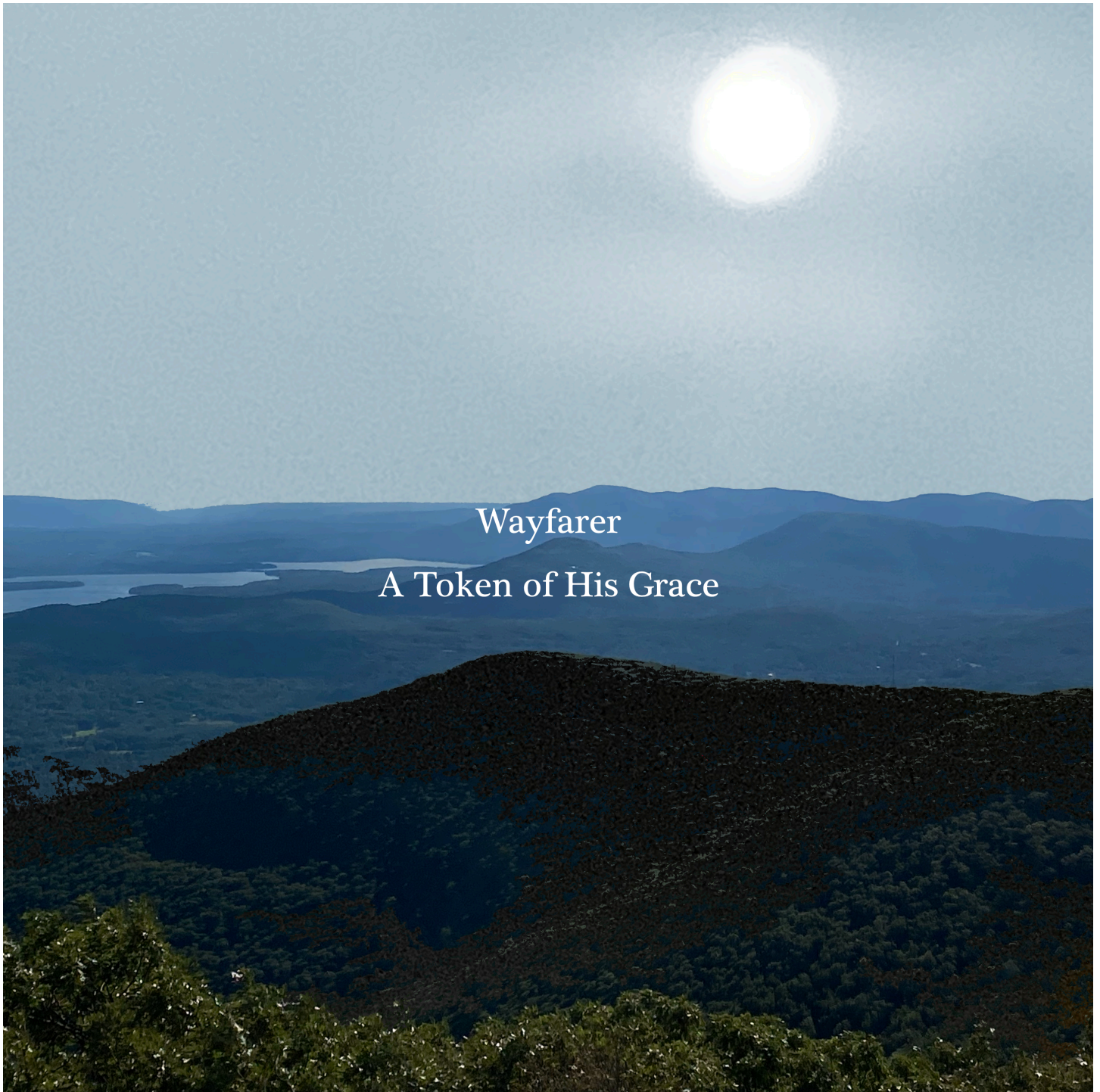
Direct Sensory Input, No Complications

8 PM

December 9

Blum Hall

***Vigilance Brandon
Steve Bonacci
Ameya Natarajan
Justin Geyer
Michael Knox
Rodney Clark***



Wayfarer
A Token of His Grace