

Chapter 12: The Resonance Is the Composer: Students Soundwriting Together

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2. “Thymesis” by Alyssa Harman

Emma Hamilton brought gorgeous acoustic guitar soundwritings to our scene of composition. She articulated guitar arrangements, as feedback and response, to the poetry and prose of numerous different peers. Here, we share one example, “Thymesis,” which began as a poem by Alyssa Harmon, became a soundwriting composition driven by Emma’s guitar, and finally grew into a video that Alyssa created by mixing her words and Emma’s music into a slideshow of photographs culled from her “convergence portfolio.” At first, Alyssa’s “Thymesis” sequence emerged gradually, over the course of many weeks. Then, after the freesound! and sensory writing workshops, Emma provided soundwriting feedback on Alyssa’s poems with multitracked acoustic guitars. Alyssa then responded by creating a new narrative, selecting key passages from the poems, and arranging them with a sequence of images over Emma’s guitars.

This is an example of how Emma and Alyssa took the “convergence” phase of the semester to be a time to turn explicitly to “musical collaboration” and soundwriting. Significantly, Alyssa is a pianist who reads sheet music but was new to the improvisatory valence of our soundwriting community. Emma’s musical identity is something she struggled with early in the semester—she even redacted the musical segment of a three-part genre experiment on “want ad” rhetoric, nixing “musician” sections while leaving “photographer” and “writer” sections intact.

As you listen to and watch what follows, we especially want you to notice these things that you could adapt to your own classes:

- How multimodal composition created a new digital space of play
- The way that collaboration allowed these students to venture outside of their comfort zones
- The new feedback that can be achieved for students when peers interpret texts sonically instead of through written prose

Transcript

[The video opens with a photo of traffic on a bridge at dusk. The sun is low, just a light yellow dot on the horizon, and the sky’s cotton candy, pastel hues bring instant calmness.]

[An acoustic guitar starts playing. The song is soft and gentle, lightly fingerpicked.]

[The next image is shot from an airplane window, showing the clouds below.]

[Finally, Alyssa’s poetry is shown on the screen as the acoustic guitar plays on, growing slightly louder; no words are spoken. Each stanza is superimposed atop an image.]

1

you had green eyes

i had blue;

you liked her

when i liked you

[Superimposed atop a photo of tree branches]

2

we never got the timing right

two cars that

passed the intersection

only a few seconds apart

[Superimposed atop a sunset photo taken from the car showing an airplane taking off in flight]

3

you were my

favorite author

because

you wrote our

story,

but you couldn't

finish the

ending

[Superimposed atop a photo of a nice bookstore]

[At this stanza, the chords change, imbuing the song with a sense of tension and sharpness. It's juxtaposed with a photo of a small, yellow flower and the following stanza.]

4

no one ever asks

why

you get scared

so easily

why you jump

when a guy first

puts his arm

around you

[At the next stanza, another guitar joins in, creating a layered harmony of acoustic sounds as we return to the original chords, resolving the tension.]

5

“it’s okay,”

you whispered.

“it’s just me.”

maybe that was the problem

[Superimposed atop a photo of a girl’s feet in sandals sitting on a water bank]

[Now, multiple layers of guitar have been added, all fingerpicked, but they're played soft enough to create a gentle soundscape that maintains its calm.]

6

the doctor says,
“show me
where it hurts,”
and you just
stand there
with your arms
spread out.

[Superimposed atop a photo of tile artwork depicting a vase containing a bouquet of flowers]

7

107.3

i found myself
driving and listening to your
favorite radio station

[Superimposed atop a photo of sprawling plains with mountains in the distance, taken through the front windshield of a car]

8

before you left
all you did was hand me
some tape and glue
and whisper “good luck”

[Superimposed atop a photo of beach brush with a sign that says “habit restoration”]

9

i keep waiting for
the phone to ring
or for you to
show up at my door
saying the words
“i can't live
without you
anymore.”

[Superimposed atop a photo of a hiking trail covered in autumn leaves]

[At this point, one of the guitars changes chords again, creating a feeling of tension that's still in harmony with the other guitars. We're meant to like it, but still look forward to the resolution.]

10

most people only sleep
with one or two pillows; i sleep with
seven or eight because i need
to fill the bed's empty space

[Superimposed atop a photo of the silhouette of a beach at sunset, the skies dusky cotton candy colored]

[Here the guitars really begin to grow louder—we sense that the end is near.]

[The musical climax begins with the next stanza.]

11

i like to take long showers
and let the soap,
water, and shampoo
wash away every single trace of
you.

[Superimposed over a photo of the silhouette of a girl on the beach at sunset, the skies peachy and yellow]

[The guitars resolve their tension as we move into the next stanza and image, leading us to the denouement of both the song and the extended poem.]

[Superimposed over a photo of sunflowers]

12

it takes twenty-one days to break a
bad habit.
well that can't be
true because it's been five years
and i'm still in love with you

[The acoustic guitar ends on a hopeful note.]