NOSTALGIA, LANDSCAPE, AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN BROOKLYN BABYLON: A CONTEMPORARY THEATRICAL WORK BY JAZZ COMPOSER DARCY JAMES ARGUE AND MEDIA ARTIST DANIJEL ŽEŽELJ

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Music with a concentration in Jazz Performance in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2021

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

This dissertation explores *Brooklyn Babylon*, a 2011 theatrical presentation by jazz composer Darcy James Argue and visual artist Danijel Žeželj, for musical elements related to contemporary expressions of nostalgia, landscape, and social criticism. *Brooklyn Babylon* is a silent animated film with a soundtrack performed by Argue’s Secret Society Big Band. The story is of an old immigrant craftsman caught in a moral dilemma between nostalgia for the ethnic neighborhood he loves and an authoritarian mayor’s ambitions to create “the tallest building in the world.”

Inspired by William Kinderman’s genetic criticism model of musical analysis, traditionally built upon an examination of written sketches, correspondence, and other sources that predate a completed work, this study constructs its understanding of the artists’ creative process through post-composition personal interviews and a targeted musical analysis of the final score. The research is complemented by cross-disciplinary theories of nostalgia and landscape by Stephen Davies, Stuart Tannock, Steven Feld, and others, that serve to illuminate and help interpret the social paradigms in the work.

The results of the study show that my research method facilitates a greater understanding of what the work means for the artists and an enhanced hearing of Argue’s musical score. More importantly, they demonstrate that this knowledge would not have been obtained through musical analysis alone. Interviews conducted with the work’s authors and performers shed light on Žeželj’s nostalgic outlook and strong views on loss while deconstructing Argue’s statement that Brooklyn Babylon was a “critique of nostalgia.” The discussions also revealed an understanding of Argue’s pre-compositional work and how his acoustical knowledge of Brooklyn’s musical culture enhanced his efforts to “sound” the various landscapes in the work.
Finally, the research uncovered how Argue’s views on gentrification in Brooklyn, and Žeželj’s experience in the former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War, served to motivate the artists to create *Brooklyn Babylon* as a statement on the social injustice of displaced people throughout the world.

In the conclusion, I offer insight on conducting the music from the work, point to further research needed, and assert the benefits of this research method for the Jazz education community.
A sincere thank you to Dr. Donna Buchanan for her inspiration, guidance, and support in the writing of this dissertation.
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Preface

Storyline of *Brooklyn Babylon*

“The Neighborhood”

The tale begins with a birds-eye view of New York that slowly descends into a vibrant neighborhood scene. A street fair is underway with images depicting street musicians, artists, balloon sellers, and a man on stilts. Landmarks tell us that this is Brooklyn, but the era is ambiguous, as people are dressed from different time periods and the state of technology is unclear.

The scene shifts into Lev Bezdomni’s Carousel Shop. Here we meet Lev, an old craftsman, accompanied by his granddaughter Mara, who in turn is always accompanied by her balloon. They join the festivities outside and make their way to Ana’s Coffee Shop. Ana’s is a welcoming place with many pictures on the wall, suggesting connections with the past.

“An Invitation”

Lev is hard at work making a carousel horse. The focus is on his hands, masterfully chiseling the wood. The doorbell rings and the mail carrier presents him with a letter. It is an invitation from the Mayor.

“The Tallest Tower in the World”

Lev and Mara go to meet the Mayor. His building his massive and foreboding, dwarfing the pair beneath large portraits on the wall. The Mayor greets them and shows Lev his plans to
build the Tallest Tower in the World. He offers Lev a commission to build a carousel to top the tower. Lev is honored, but Mara is skeptical.

“Construction/Deconstruction”

The scene shifts back to Lev’s woodworking shop. He has been brainstorming what kind of carousel to make for the Mayor to no avail. Mara suggests that they return to Ana’s, and on their way, they find the atmosphere of city has vastly changed. Posters of the Mayor’s face are posted on closed businesses, police barricades have been erected, and heavy construction equipment is on the streets. Lev and Mara climb a huge mound of debris to find that the neighborhood has been razed to accommodate the construction of the Mayor’s tower. They discover the sign for Ana’s Coffee lying twisted at their feet.

“Builders”

Lev is faced with a moral dilemma. He has accepted the commission, but must find a way to protest the Mayor’s actions. He is beset by a nightmare that Mara is consumed by a giant construction machine. He awakens, and seeing Mara’s drawings of her, Lev, and his carousel figures floating away tethered to balloons, he devises a plan for a special carousel.

“Missing Parts”

Lev begins to work on his special carousel. His hands masterfully carve the new carousel figures. This will be the finest carousel he has ever made. There will be a tiger, for fire, a dolphin, water, a Griffin for air, and an elephant for the earth. The four elements of nature. To
assemble his special carousel, Lev sets out in search of those who can help him build the missing parts.

“Grand Opening”

The streets are again filled with people, a celebration for the Grand Opening of the Tower of Brooklyn. A patriotic parade is underway with graffiti and a marching band. The mayor and his wife arrive dressed like 1920s tycoons—he in a dapper suit with high-collared shirt, his wife adorned with a fashionable hat. They enter the elevator and press “Top”. Higher and higher they go, the neighborhoods growing smaller and smaller beneath them. Arriving at the summit, they are greeted by their invited guests, and then turn to Lev’s magnificent tiny carousel. Quaintly spinning at first, the carousel, with Lev and Mara aboard, soon turns faster and faster, and upon deploying a balloon, it lifts off from the tower leaving the Mayor and his entourage in utter disbelief.

“Coney Island”

It’s a sunny day on Coney Island, and Ana and some residents of the old neighborhood have gathered. A tiny speck appears in the sky, growing larger and larger, until the carousel comes into view and lightly touches down among the dunes. Everyone gathers around as the men unfold the special carousel, transforming it into the new Ana’s Coffee. It is a triumphant scene. The ending finds Lev staring across the ocean contemplating all he has lost. Mara stands with her back to the waves. She raises her arm and lets her balloon go.
Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the 2011 multimedia work *Brooklyn Babylon*, investigating contemporary expressions of nostalgia and landscape that shape the work, and examining how the artists express their worldview through their respective creative processes. *Brooklyn Babylon* is presented theatrically, with Argue’s ensemble placed onstage in a raised circle beneath the projected images while Žeželj simultaneously paints live from scaffolding above the screen. The animated film is silent, and Argue and his musicians perform the music dressed in costumes representing the classes of people that appear in the images. The story is of an old immigrant craftsman who accepts a commission from the mayor to build a carousel to top his “Tallest Building in the World,” only to realize later that the mayor’s plans will destroy the neighborhood that he calls home. *Brooklyn Babylon* is both an allegory for, and a social criticism of, events happening in the New York City borough of Brooklyn at the time the work was created: gentrification in the Williamsburg neighborhood; the use of eminent domain by the city to build a sports stadium; and the interaction between local artists and Hipsters—young, rich newcomers who were coopting nostalgic trends in the community for personal gain.

The approach to this research is inspired by a concept first utilized in the 1970s by French literary scholars. While embracing a traditional analytical approach to a musical work, which includes a linear study of written sketches and drafts, this concept, known as genetic criticism, asserts that research should not end with the work itself. Elements such as correspondence, socio-economic context, and biographical information serve to “undermine the very notion of the musical work as an isolated aesthetic object.”¹ William Kinderman has likened

genetic criticism research to an “iceberg,” where the complete meaning behind a composition is obscured beneath the surface of a sea of other documents.²

Though a focused musical analysis of Argue’s score for *Brooklyn Babylon* will be a major component of this study, my research is also informed by extramusical content. This includes structured interviews with the artists; biographical information; cross-disciplinary theories of nostalgia and place; and musicological theories of the creative process. While the former will contribute to the study of trends in big band jazz composition, the latter, I believe, is critical to a greater understanding of the work.

The choice of interpretive paradigms to enhance my study of *Brooklyn Babylon* relates to a larger investigation of nostalgia, landscape, and identity in which I will compare this work with composer Maria Schneider’s *The Thompson Fields*, a 2015 CD project focused on her musical expressions of growing up in rural Minnesota. This dissertation is part one of this research. Both works speak to contemporary views on embracing the past and understanding the world through landscape, and how the creative process can be a space in which artists can express their identity in relation to the world around them.

The works were selected because they are recent large-scale projects composed by artists directing their own big bands with musicians who are integral to the music’s performance. Also of importance is that the compositions were conceived by the artists as interconnected narratives, in contrast to a collection of individual pieces. That the music was also accessible to me through live performance was also a consideration.

Genesis of the Project

With an extensive background in music education, audio engineering, and music performance, I came to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in 2012 to pursue graduate work devoted to the study of Jazz. During the course of this study I developed an interest in through-composed jazz composition. The result was a Masters study entitled, “Analysis of the Development of Tonal, Free Form Compositional Techniques in Selected Works of Jazz Composers Horace Silver, Benny Golson, and Thad Jones.” A subsequent research project for the the Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) program at UIUC focused on Carla Bley’s jazz opera, Escalator Over the Hill.

A summer course with Professor William Kinderman concerning the analysis of musical sketches and scores introduced me to the concept of genetic criticism, and with this means of inquiry in mind, I formulated a concept for the DMA utilizing this approach. Alerted by my professor, Jim Pugh, that Brooklyn Babylon would be performed at UIUC in October 2017, the work piqued my interest, so I contacted Mr. Argue to secure an interview during his visit. He agreed, allowing me to attend the dress rehearsal for the performance, as well.

During this interview Argue focused on his compositional choices for the piece. He explained his pre-compositional work, and how this approach contributed to musical connections between episodes. He described how the theme for the carousel was developed, and why he included Balkan music in the composition. He related how he and Žeželj worked in conjunction, creating Brooklyn Babylon scene by scene. His approach to changes in setting and mood was also explained. This information would lay the foundation for the musical analysis included in my study.

3 A jazz work built on a continuous trajectory, rather than repeating previous material in its original form, a category to which I believed Brooklyn Babylon belonged.
After viewing both the rehearsal and the performance of *Brooklyn Babylon*, I was awestruck by the presentation I had witnessed. Powerful in its black-and-white imagery, Žeželj’s tale was much more than a story about a skyscraper. It was about the demolition of a vibrant neighborhood, and the livelihoods of its residents, to satisfy the vanity of an authoritarian figure. Totalitarian imagery crisscrossed the screen as the old craftsman worked to create a special carousel in a valiant attempt to make a statement of resistance in the face of monumental loss and emotional turmoil. It was a story of a neighborhood that lost everything but hoped to rebuild. Argue’s music, though emanating from a traditional big band, pushed the boundaries of how that ensemble could sound, not abandoning jazz per se, but expanding it to include modernist writing, along with driving rock and Balkan Brass Band musical grooves. The full range of clarinets and flutes was employed, pushing the wind players to their technical limits. Euphonium, tuba, and a large Balkan *tapan* drum extended the orchestration further and were particularly powerful in the Balkan grooves that occurred throughout the work.

Žeželj’s main character, the master craftsman Lev, was not drawn from an American profile. His features are chiseled, angular, and worn. I perceived this character was an immigrant, and possibly eastern European. Although imagery made it clear that this was a modern Brooklyn, Lev’s shop reflected the past, as he only worked with hand tools in carving his carousel horses. His young granddaughter, always present, carries a balloon, possibly a symbol of innocence. Ana, the owner of a coffee shop, also central to the story, presents as an immigrant as well. This is a story of immigrants who become displaced a second time.

In the weeks after the performance I returned to thoughts about what shape my dissertation might take. During this time, I became influenced by additional academic study for a cognate in ethnomusicology. Here I was introduced to social theories of nostalgia and
landscape, and identity. In a brainstorming session with my research advisor, Dr. Donna Buchanan, I soon realized that much about *Brooklyn Babylon* might be learned through the lens of these paradigms. With this approach in mind, interviews with Žeželj and a second interview with Argue were secured, along with three of his musicians, and the result was a rich resource that informed the dissertation far beyond musical analysis alone.

**Background**

A native of Vancouver, Canada, Argue pursued a career in jazz in Montreal before arriving in the United States to study with acclaimed jazz arranger Bob Brookmeyer at the New England Conservatory. Since establishing himself in Brooklyn and forming his Secret Society big band, Argue has received numerous accolades for his innovative approach to this ensemble.⁴

Argue’s vision for his big band relates to the literary genre of Steampunk, that is, science fiction dealing with nineteenth-century societies dominated by historical or imagined steam-powered technology.⁵ His thought was, as that genre brought forward older technology into futuristic settings, the same could be applied to the big band. He wondered, “What would happen if that instrumentation had persisted through [time]? What if that was still a necessity for popular music, and every song you heard on the radio had a big band behind it still? What might that music sound like?”⁶

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Argue’s premiere CD, *The Infernal Machines* (2009), with his Secret Society big band, received many accolades, including appearing on more than 70 of the year’s “best-of” lists. It was named “Best Debut” by the *Village Voice*, and topped three separate categories in *Downbeat*’s annual Critic’s Poll.⁷

Danijel Žeželj is a Croatian-born media artist and author of several graphic novels utilizing the stop-animation medium. Žeželj was influenced by experimental and satirical European comic artists from the late 1970s and early ’80s, particularly from Italy and France. One of his recent projects is “Luna Park,” written with the author Kevin Baker and published by Vertigo, the adult-reader wing of DC Comics.⁸

Although not initially interested in mixing abstract art and music, Žeželj liked the music from Argue’s *Infernal Machines*. He often sees imagery when listening to music, and Argue’s music generated black-and-white imagery that aligned with his interest in the visual aesthetic of the 1920s and 1930s. For his part, Argue had definite feelings about combining music with film: “the story must be the first priority. I didn’t want to do music [that was] disconnected from abstract imagery.”⁹

The two agreed to collaborate on Žeželj’s story *Brooklyn Babylon*, and it was premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Festival in 2011. The presentation was well received, winning acclaim from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, and *Newsweek*, with many critics praising its powerful theatrical effect and importance as a new

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⁷ Darcy James Argue, “DCist interview: Darcy James Argue,” Interview by Sirian Gopal.
⁹ Ibid., 3.
multimedia work. A National Public Radio Review by Patrick Jarenwattananon lauded the work’s emotional range, the timelessness of the imagery, and the coherence of the score. Ben Ratcliff of the New York Times noted its uniqueness among contemporary improvisatory jazz multimedia works as being “heavily planned, built of thick shadows and big band polyphony.” Argue’s music from the work was nominated for a 2011 Grammy Award.

Brooklyn Babylon was Argue’s first large-scale collaborative work, but it would soon be followed in 2015 by Real Enemies, a multimedia work with writer-director Isaac Butler and filmmaker Peter Nigrini. The music from this work also received a Grammy nomination in 2017. More recent projects include a 2018 collaboration with Cécile McLorin Salvant’s original song cycle Ogresse and continued performances of the Darcy James Argue Secret Society big band.

Brooklyn Babylon has only been performed four times outside Brooklyn since its debut, including its performance at UIUC. A video of the imagery from the work with Argue’s soundtrack is available on vimeo.com, but lacks the Interludes from the work. Argue has also released a CD of the complete music from the work, and it is available for purchase from the artist’s website. The music from one episode, “The Neighborhood,” is available for purchase from the artist’s website and has been performed outside Argue’s Secret Society band. The full
score of the work is also available for download from the website for study. With Argue’s support, I organized, rehearsed, and conducted a full performance of the work’s music (including the Interludes) at UIUC in February 2019. This is the only known performance of the whole score outside Argue’s Secret Society ensemble to date. A video of this performance is available on YouTube.  

**Literature Review**

Only one dissertation has addressed *Brooklyn Babylon*. Jason Slaughters’s 2017 “Contemporary Big Band Music” includes a subsection on Darcy James Argue, giving some background on the artist and his approach to composition. He also gives an analysis of the episode “The Neighborhood” focusing on its harmonic structure, orchestration, and form. How the music relates to the imagery is only described in basic detail, however, with little research into the characters or the storyline. Nevertheless, this is a good example of an analytical approach to an episode within the work, discussing early compositional ideas and how they developed through the compositional process.

In 2018, I investigated fifteen literature references to Darcy James Argue that included both interviews and commentary on his work. Only six had material on *Brooklyn Babylon*. The most extensive is the previously mentioned review by Ben Ratcliff of the *New York Times*. His 2011 article, predating the premiere of the work, addressed the artists’ backgrounds, their identities as immigrants, and their collaboration, situating the work among contemporary multimedia jazz projects. An April 2013 National Public Radio feature gave a review of a

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17 Author’s performance of the music from *Brooklyn Babylon*, https://youtu.be/8AAbVicrdk0.
performance, as noted above, while a November 2013 ICareIfYouListen web entry provided
details on the genesis of the work.\textsuperscript{19} As part of an August 2016 interview with the International
Association of Jazz Composers and Arrangers, Argue discussed how his music for \textit{Brooklyn
Babylon} had to reflect the emotional struggles of the main character, Lev.\textsuperscript{20} The remaining two
articles covered only basic information on the work. Consequently, this dissertation contributes
significantly to the scholarship on \textit{Brooklyn Babylon}, providing a much more detailed
understanding of the creative process for, and significance of, the work.

\textbf{Analytical Resources}

To illustrate how music can play a role in the expression of nostalgia and landscape, I
employed research that has been done in ethnomusicology and related fields of the social
sciences. This section is primarily an overview of the analytical tools employed in this study as
the theoretical details of the approaches are integrated into the chapters that follow.

\textbf{Nostalgia Studies}

The point of departure in nostalgia study begins with Svetlana Boym’s \textit{The Future of
Nostalgia} (2001), in which she postulates two types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective.

Restorative nostalgia involves the pursuit of an actual recreation of the past, usually within the
context of a nationalist political movement, while reflective is a mental space where the meaning

\textsuperscript{19} Darcy James Argue, “5 Questions to Darcy James Argue (Composer),” Interview by George Heathco,
icareifyoulisten.com, American Composers Forum, November 7, 2013,

\textsuperscript{20} Darcy James Argue, “An Interview With: Darcy James Argue,” Omar Thomas, \textit{International Society of
and representation of the past are individually or collectively remembered. The reflective goal is not to recreate the past, but rather integrate it into the present.

The nature of nostalgia can be complex, however, so I integrated another approach into this study to add clarification. Stuart Tannock’s theory of nostalgia looks for resources in the past and whether they can be brought into the present, as well as what lies between, an interstitial realm he envisions as a discontinuity.21 This approach allows for a more detailed analysis of a nostalgia’s component parts and the formulation of a critique.

Another extensive resource utilized throughout this study is Between Nostalgia, Utopia and Realities (2008), a collection of essays from the tenth international symposium of the Department of Musicology of the University of Arts in Belgrade that considers nostalgic tendencies in many genres of music.22 Among the essays I reference for this discussion is an approach for analyzing nostalgia within an artist’s creative process, a discussion of the use of orchestrational devices to evoke nostalgia, and an investigation into whether the integration of compositional styles of the past indicate nostalgia.

Landscape

I will focus on two approaches to landscape within Brooklyn Babylon. The first is how Argue creates the atmosphere for the various spaces in the imagery, and the second will entail how Argue’s aural understanding of living in Brooklyn enters into his creative process.

Brooklyn Babylon’s landscapes are fertile ground for investigation as scenes of the neighborhood and the construction of the tower, along with interior spaces, such as Lev’s

carousel shop, Ana’s coffee, and the Mayor’s Hall, all of which have significance within the work. Whereas a film may have sound effects built into the soundtrack, providing the audience with aural cues to the surroundings in a given scene, Argue is tasked with “sounding” the environments in *Brooklyn Babylon*. How he creates these soundscapes will primarily be examined through a targeted musical analysis. This analysis will include identifying specific compositional devices in rhythm, harmonic structure, orchestration, and form that serve to provide a sonic reference for the audience. Texts on jazz harmony, orchestration, and twentieth-century composition will be incorporated into this analysis, along with examples from Argue’s previous works.

The second approach to landscape in *Brooklyn Babylon* will be examined in relation to Steven Feld’s concept of acoustemology, which explores how we comprehend and sense our world through sound. This theory moves beyond what simply can be observed to our everyday acoustic perception of language, music, physical environments, nature, and technological media. Argue’s explanation of the importance of Indie Rock to the music culture of Brooklyn will be discussed in relation to the style’s inclusion in the music for the imagery of “The Neighborhood.” The recreation of street musician ensembles in the Interludes and his incorporation of the Balkan Brass Band style, based on his experience with a weekly musical club cultural experience, also speak to this knowledge of Brooklyn through sound.

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Chapter Overview

This dissertation consists of three chapters. In the first, an examination of how Argue handles nostalgia in the work is undertaken, with emphasis on unpacking Argue’s statement of how *Brooklyn Babylon* is for him a “critique of nostalgia.” His music for the episode “Grand Opening” will be highlighted, both for its symbolism and its nostalgic effect on the audience.

In the second chapter, the discussion will shift to Žeželj and his views on loss. My focus is his outlook regarding the decline of craftwork done with the hands and the lost art of carousel building, which is central to the story. The significance of Lev’s name is unpacked. His statements and imagery related to authoritarian architecture are examined for clues to his design for the tower and the Mayor’s Hall. Finally, I investigate his decision to instill a sense of loss in the audience, through a theatrical device he employs at the end of the work, for its powerful message on loss.

The third chapter examines the collaborative creative process for the work between the artists and the compositional choices Argue makes to reflect the changes in atmosphere and mood required by Žeželj’s imagery. His incorporation of minimalism, atonal pitch sets, plateau modal jazz harmonies, orchestrational tonus, hocketing canons, and irregular phrase lengths and meter are all analyzed in relation to the realization of the work’s imagery. Emphasis is also placed on Argue’s handling of landscapes as both sonic and cultural experiences for the audience. Argue’s use of thematic development to support the emotional bonds between the characters throughout the storyline is of special focus, and his efforts to link musical ideas together to form a cohesive soundtrack are documented.

In the conclusion to this research, I evaluate my success in building a picture of the creative process for *Brooklyn Babylon* by reviewing my findings in relation to achieving a deeper
understanding of the work and creating a greater aural appreciation of its music. I discuss the importance of my interviews with the artists, the results of viewing the work through the lens of social theories of nostalgia and landscape, and summarize the key musical elements of Argue’s score that support Žeželj’s imagery. I will also evaluate *Brooklyn Babylon* as a work of nostalgia and social commentary by the artists.

In the final section, avenues for future research are described in terms of musical analysis and extramusical resources. I also outline my plans for continuing research with a comparison of *Brooklyn Babylon* to Maria Schneider’s *The Thompson Fields*. For jazz educators wanting to bring some of Argue’s music into their ensembles, I offer a guide from my own experience performing the music from *Brooklyn Babylon*. Finally, I convey my thoughts on continuing to explore jazz utilizing the genetic criticism model.
Chapter 1

Nostalgia in Darcy James Argue’s Creative Process for *Brooklyn Babylon*

When I interviewed Darcy James Argue for the second time, in 2018, I planned to go beyond the musical analysis focus of our 2015 interview to explore further the extramusical factors that influenced his creative process in composing *Brooklyn Babylon.*\(^{24}\) I had many questions about the artists’ backgrounds and the significance of the characters and images in the film. But as the interview progressed, I began to advance my understanding of Boym’s theories of nostalgia and invited his thinking on how they might relate to *Brooklyn Babylon.* His reply challenged my assumptions:

> I want to circle back to nostalgia . . . because you were talking about the piece being nostalgic and that’s not actually what we are trying to do. I don’t think it is nostalgic, but a critique of nostalgia.

This was a curious answer, but understanding how the work was, for Argue, a “critique of nostalgia” led me to a greater understanding of the factors behind it.

Argue stated that he and collaborator Danijel Žeželj had similar goals in immigrating to New York: to be among fellow artists. Argue related that they both viewed Brooklyn as “looming so large in literature, film, art, and music, and [this] is the idea in your head about what it’s going to be like before your move there. This “Brooklyn of the Imagination” (Argue’s term) was a concept that they tried to convey in their vision for *Brooklyn Babylon.*

This utopian mindset is the backdrop of the story. But even as Argue settled in to his new artistic environment, the reality was that changes were happening in the borough, and those

\(^{24}\) Darcy James Argue in discussions with the author, November 12, 2015 and June 3, 2019.
changes were beginning to have a negative impact on the artistic community and residents of the older immigrant neighborhoods.

To get a sense of what was happening during that time, I turn first to my interview with Rob Wilkerson, a long-time saxophonist in Argue’s band, about his experience living and working in the borough. Wilkerson arrived in 2001 and settled in South Park Slope:

> It was safe, affordable and all families, and if you wanted to play jazz, you played jazz . . . This is Brooklyn—like maybe there are Jewish musicians playing a Balkan gig, or African musicians playing a Jewish gig—we all play all kinds of music here, because this is what we do. But now, things are changing. There’s a coffee shop down the street, and that was fine for me, but not great for everyone in the neighborhood. It’s changed a lot. It’s not Brooklyn of America anymore, and I don’t think [I] would ever think of moving here now. It would be really hard to play music.

In my interview with Žeželj, he too observed the shift. Settling in Lefferts Gardens, an affordable Jamaican community, in 2002, he noted that for many years, “there was not one cafe in the neighborhood.” Because “people in that neighborhood—they don’t sit in cafes. They don’t drink coffee and play on their laptops. But ten years later there were the first cafes opening up, and probably some people were forced to leave because it was becoming more expensive.”

Following these initial comments, Žeželj and Wilkerson both referred to a significant event that happened in the Atlantic Yards district of Brooklyn in early 2004. A large development was planned there that was to include a skyscraper and a sports arena. The tower was never built, but the city used eminent domain to destroy a neighborhood and build a new stadium, Barclays Center, for the New York Nets NBA basketball team. Žeželj described the event:

> There was a big project. Atlantic Yards, and the original idea was to build this skyscraper . . . They reduced it a little bit because they ran out of money, but they did destroy a big part of that neighborhood to build this new sports arena. And there was a lot of resistance from the people who lived there, because they knew that some of them [would] be forced to leave and the neighborhood would change, which is exactly what happened.
Though there was not a direct correlation between the 2004 Atlantic Yards development and the creation of *Brooklyn Babylon* (2012)—Žeželj had the idea for a story about a tower years before the incident—Argue nevertheless related that the storyline was an allegory for the displacement of residents. His views on the changes in another Brooklyn neighborhood, Williamsburg, highlighted an even more significant factor that was prompting such displacement: the rapidly escalating cost of housing.

Williamsburg transformed in a very short period from a place where there was a lot of space, and artists could create music and make art, [to a place] within less than a decade where you could be priced out of the neighborhood. The neighborhood completely transformed into an exclusive and not quite a gated community, but [an]incredibly expensive and exclusive community that is more expensive than most people in Manhattan [pay], and populated mainly by hedge-fund managers.

**Argue’s Criticism of the Mayor’s Nostalgia**

Gentrification has become a well-known phenomenon in many American cities since 2000; wealthy young populations move into older neighborhoods, pricing out residents, often people of color. But some of Williamsburg’s new residents took on a particular way of distinguishing themselves. They were the Hipsters, defined by Merriam-Webster as people “who [are] unusually aware [of] or interested in new or unconventional patterns.”

The term “Hipster” has a long history, but our focus here is on Argue’s observations of a cultural trend happening at the time *Brooklyn Babylon* was written.

In Mark Greif’s informative magazine article about this new population, he states that the contemporary Hipster appeared around 1999 in the Wicker Park area of Chicago, “where a

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subculture of aspiring artists and entrepreneurs became a playground for a nearby class of new, young rich urbanites. The nouveau riche adapted the trends happening in this subculture as a sign of their Hipness.”

This same cultural intersection arrived in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn in the early 2000s, where new money from the stock market made it into old neighborhoods, raising rents, displacing existing residents, and interacting with local artists. As in Chicago, the new residents started adopting the trends of the subculture. McKenzie, in his article on fixed-gear bikes and Hipsters, gives the following example.

The bicycle messengers who hammer through gridlocked traffic, gliding across lanes being funky and fearless, were using old-style single-gear bicycles to make their rounds (for practical reasons). This rebel subculture was noticed by the Hipsters, and soon thereafter the bike became a must-have commodity for them.

Argue noted that these retro trends also included interests in waltzes, marches, mustaches, and 1920s clothing from vintage clothing shops. And Žeželj observed, “guys, except for the sneakers, [were] dressed like they would have been 100 years ago.”

The character of the Mayor in Brooklyn Babylon, with his 1920s-era suit, high shirt collar, and large mustache, is a representation of this Brooklyn culture. Could his attraction to these retro trends be thought of as nostalgic? Analyzing this attraction to the past within contemporary theories of the phenomenon is problematic, as what contemporary Hipsters are trying to do is demonstrate their wealth through what they believe to be a superior knowledge of cool trends. It is toward this display of affluence, and its detrimental effects on the older

residents of Brooklyn neighborhoods, that Argue and Žeželj directed their criticism in *Brooklyn Babylon*.

Before delving into how Argue creates a musical criticism of the nostalgia distinguishing the Mayor’s character, I believe that it is important to establish a basis for understanding how I use the concept of nostalgia generally in this chapter. For this, I turn to sociologist Stuart Tannock, whose article “Nostalgia Critique” provides one model for analyzing the concept.\(^\text{28}\)

In outlining his theory, Tannock draws on language of the biblical story of Adam and Eve. He describes their surroundings as a pre-lapsian world, an unspoiled past in which the sources of nostalgia exist. In this world, there are continuities or sources that are perceived to be useful in the post-lapsian, spoiled, present world to compensate for feelings of loss. Separating these two worlds is a discontinuity or “cut.” This is an event, real or imagined, that separates the unspoiled past from the unfulfilled present. As resources in the present seem inadequate in alleviating these feelings of loss, Tannock asks,

> To what degree is the continuity asserted by the nostalgic vision one of retreat, and to what degree is it a continuity of retrieval? Are the sources of identity and community in the past irretrievable in that past, as being accessible only as objects of a private and insular reflection and retrospect? Or are such sources retrievable as resources, as supports for community and identity-building projects in the present?

Evaluating or performing a “critique” of a given nostalgia is the process of exploring what has been edited out of the continuity between past and present, and how and where the cut is interpreted and located.\(^\text{29}\)

To understand the Brooklyn Hipster’s attraction to the past, and in doing so, that of the Mayor, where lie the continuities and the cut? None of these Hipsters lived in the early twentieth

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\(^{29}\) Stuart Tannock, “Nostalgia Critique,” 457.
century. They have no frame of reference from living in that era to view it as a resource for nostalgia, but they nevertheless viewed the retro trends happening in the artistic community as useful for their lives. The cut is puzzling. They did not lack financial resources, and there were plenty of ways they could have demonstrated their status through materialism, so in what way did they find the present inadequate? The answer may be that they found traditional consumerism lacking as a unique way to distinguish themselves. Greif defines the Hipster as a person “who in fact aligns himself both with a rebel subculture and with the dominant class.”

Emulating the rebel subculture fulfills their need to distinguish themselves from others through their perceived superior ability to identify what in the moment is the most cool. Greif elaborates: 

[In] the contemporary hipster, … there exists a common element. And that is his relationship to consumption. The rebel consumer (Hipster) is the person who, adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinces himself that buying the right mass products individualizes him as transgressive. Purchasing [these] products represents not hostility to authority (as among punks or hippies) but a superior community of status.

The retro trends in the subculture in the 2010s were seen as cool resources that could be brought into the Hipsters’ present lives to demonstrate their unique cultural identity. Thus, their nostalgia is a retrieval of elements from the past. In Boym’s terminology, this would be a restorative nostalgia.

To critique these Hipsters’ nostalgia using Tannock’s criteria, we need to look at what was left out of their restoration of the past. This might be categorized as a total disinterest in understanding, or integrating into, the retro subculture itself or in recognizing the negative effect of gentrification on the neighborhood around them. Brooklyn Babylon grew out of the artists’ view of this social issue.

30 Mark Greif, “What Was the Hipster?”
In the story, for dramatic effect, the Mayor is portrayed as a kind of super Hipster. His 1920s-era dress, ticker-tape parade, and privately commissioned carousel to top his tallest tower in the world are all part of an image to show that he has reached the pinnacle of retro gilded-age cool.

Argue criticized this image as the antithesis of that characterizing the common residents of the neighborhoods. He stated the contrast:

the sense of community we see in the imagery of the street fairs and in the people Lev and Mara pass on the way to Ana’s Coffee Shop and among the craftspeople that help build the special carousel, … that is more reflective of Brooklyn today as compared to the very narrow vision of the Mayor.

Argue elaborated further:

To me the Mayor reads as a Hipster. He’s got the handle bar mustache and the glad-handing and old-time fascinations; and everyone is wearing kind of turn-of-the-century clothing, kind of like nineteenth- or twentieth-century formal wear; and they go up to the top of his tower and it’s like a gilded-age garden party; and there is the unveiling of the carousel. That’s what the mayor represents, but that is very different than the lived life you see in the imagery of the Brooklyn Babylon neighborhood.

I asked Žeželj to comment on Argue’s observations:

I think Darcy’s description is pretty accurate. He [the Mayor] is symbolic but we try not to be too simple with him; he is not a mean guy necessarily— he is a charming guy, and he sort of gets things done, but he obviously doesn’t care about the same things that the people of the neighborhood care about. He sees this carousel as something that belongs to the past. It’s not something that’s useful anymore, but he is going to preserve it as a museum piece. So, that’s the idea— from the beginning—to invite this master who is going to create this very special exclusive piece that is going to be on top of the building. So, the Mayor himself would be a symbol of maybe destructive forces. That might be too strong of a word, but not someone who does good. I tried to pick some persona—maybe hipster, [but] that was not in my mind at the moment. But you look at him today and he very much looks like them.

So, here is the crux of Argue’s statement that *Brooklyn Babylon* is a “critique of nostalgia”: It is a criticism of a type of contemporary consumption that co-opts an artistic trend, displays it as a
symbol of wealth and power, and then ignores the impact of that wealth on the lives of the artists themselves and the community at large.

**Argue’s “Sounding” of the Mayor’s Nostalgia**

Musicologist Stephen Davies, in his 1994 book, *Mutual Meaning and Expression*, defined three states or classifications of experiencing nostalgia. In the first, a person emotionally experiences nostalgia. In the second, one can observe how a person, such as a composer, expresses that feeling in their work. What musical choices does he/she make? In the third, the composer seeks to simulate nostalgia by using devices that represent nostalgia or create a nostalgic response in a listener.\(^31\) It is to this third form that I turn my attention first, as Argue reached for music that could both stimulate feelings of nostalgia in the audience and represent nostalgia in the Mayor’s ambitions.

As we explore Argue’s musical choices, it is important to note that, as Veselinovic-Hoffman explained in her article on nostalgia in post-modern music, “music by itself is not capable of expressing nostalgia on its own; it cannot feel, or experience anything emotionally, so it often needs a text or lyric to point the way.” Absent this, she asks: “Does nostalgia sound, and how?” “Music can only become nostalgic when we hear it as such.”\(^32\) *Brooklyn Babylon* is not solely a musical composition, but the significance of the accompanying imagery can be ambiguous, as the work provides no narration or program notes for the audience. So, if Argue strived to give the Mayor’s nostalgia a “sound,” how did he go about it?

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The scene that most epitomizes the Mayor’s nostalgic state occurs in the episode “Grand Opening,” where he stages a celebration for the completion of his Tallest Tower in the World. It begins with a nationalist parade, and proceeds through scenes of the Mayor and his wife arriving at the top of the tower, where he showcases Lev’s carousel to an exclusive gathering of his peers. Argue’s music for the parade and the unveiling of the carousel serve to focus the audience’s attention on the Mayor’s nostalgic spectacle.

To invoke an atmosphere of nostalgia, Argue composed what he called a pastiche of a Sousa march from the early twentieth century as well as a theme for the carousel that imitated the sound of an old calliope. These two musical styles come from Argue’s understanding of the American cultural references they convey. It is important to note that if these musical devices did not resonate with the audience, the nostalgic references would be ineffective.

The imitation of an old Sousa march, with its accented harmonized theme, two-beat feel in march tempo (120 beats per minute) and melodic counterlines, is quintessential Americana. Much of the audience would instantly recognize this music as a style that is commonly played at parades and concerts on holidays such as Memorial Day and Independence Day. Such music has also been common at historic parades commemorating national achievements, and it is in that tradition that the Mayor organizes his celebration (Ex. 1.1).³³

³³ Musical score excerpts used by permission of Darcy James Argue
In Žeželj’s imagery, we see people from the neighborhoods coming to see the “Grand Opening” of the Tower of Brooklyn. The imagery has all the trappings of a New York City ticker-tape parade. Confetti is in the air and there is a marching band in the street. An accordion player with an Uncle Sam hat walks through the crowd. The Mayor arrives and is shown with his hand over his heart. The opening of the Tower of Brooklyn is thus squarely placed within an old American patriotic tradition (Fig. 1.2).\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{34} All images used by permission of Danijel Žeželj.
To represent the carousel, Argue constructed a slow waltz theme, orchestrating it to imitate a calliope, the common automated instrument intrinsically linked to the experience. To an American listener, this music could generate memories of county fairs and amusement parks, both as a musical soundscape and a physical motion experience. Argue describes the music:

[There is a theme in the] piccolo [pitched] an octave and a fifth above a straight-mute[ted] trumpet being harmonized by bucket-mute[d] trumpet 3, and there’s the ba da dot, ba da dot accompaniment in cup-mute[d] trumpets 4 and 5 and in the clarinet[s] and bass clarinet, and this is meant to sound like an old fairground calliope.

Lauren Redhead, in her article regarding “Nostalgia and Utopia in Quotations of Nineteenth and Late Twentieth-Century Music,” noted that a slow waltz has been utilized by composers to create a sense of timelessness, of endless return, perhaps encapsulating
nostalgia itself. The carousel experience could be thought of in this way, and this
timelessness enhances the choice by Žeželj to make the carousel the nostalgic icon of the
story, a concept that will be explored more fully in chapter two. Argue’s carousel theme
(Ex. 1.2).36

Ex. 1.2. Original carousel theme

Argue’s choice of the march and the carousel music brings the audience’s nostalgia into
the performance in a very interconnected way, for these experiences are, by their very nature,
community events. Their memories, by and large, would be fond ones in nature, reminisces of
special social times. The Mayor in the story, by contrast, views his “Grand Opening” quite
differently. He considers his architectural achievement to be best celebrated with a recreation of

35 Lauren Redhead, “A Father Who Presents a Constant Challenge to the Present: Nostalgia and Utopia in
Quotations of Nineteenth and Late Twentieth-Century Music,” in Between Nostalgia, Utopia, and
Realities, eds. Vesna Mikić, Ivana Perković, Tijana Popović Mladenovic, and Mirjana Veselinović-
Hofman, Musicological Studies: Proceedings, No. 4 (Belgrade: Faculty of Music, University of Arts,
2012), 157.
36 All compositional excerpts used by permission of Darcy James Argue.
old-time nationalist pageantry while dressed like a tycoon from the 1920s. He does not invite the community into his tower, instead choosing to ride the elevator to the top accompanied only by his wife, while the neighborhood below becomes smaller and smaller as they ascend. The gathering at the summit is for a select few to view the unveiling of the ultimate in retro acquisitions: a personal carousel. For the Mayor, this early twentieth-century nostalgia is a commodity to be bought and exhibited for show as a demonstration of superior knowledge, wealth, and power. The march and calliope music, therefore, represent both communal reflective nostalgia and individualistic restorative nostalgia simultaneously.

Although dramatized for theatrical effect, Argue’s core social message nevertheless rings true for Brooklyn in the 2000s and 2010s. A neighborhood was destroyed to build a stadium. Towers were built for exclusive residents in Williamsburg, and gentrification made living in the borough unaffordable for many older immigrant and minority communities.

**Was Argue’s Creative Process Influenced by Nostalgia?**

We have seen how Argue utilized the imitation of musical styles to simulate nostalgia as a social critique in *Brooklyn Babylon*. But what of Davies’s other categories of nostalgic experience? Was Argue’s creative process influenced by a sense of nostalgia within himself?

In the interviews, Argue’s focus was on the here and now. Although he was happy to talk about the creative process for *Brooklyn Babylon*, it was clear that this work was in the past, and even the 2015 interview drifted into talking of his newer work, *Real Enemies*, which itself was in the past by the time of our 2018 conversation. Žeželj, by contrast, spent much of his interview talking of the loss of craftsmanship, like the making of carousels, and how modern cities had fewer craftsmen and more desk workers.
Argue’s statements about the changes he witnessed in Brooklyn in the 2010s might be perceived as nostalgic. His comments, however, did not reflect a desire to remove the Hipsters and restore the neighborhoods; instead, they reflected a resignation that what was happening could not be reversed. This sense of irretrievability suggests a reflective nostalgia. If one were to critique this nostalgia, one might say that the influx of young, college-educated artists, who populated the new coffee shops with their cell phones and laptops, were themselves changing the sense of community in the older neighborhoods. (Disclaimer: I agreed to meet Argue for the 2018 interview at a local coffee shop in Brooklyn, bringing both my cell phone and laptop.) In the final analysis, however, there was no evidence that the changes happening in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn affected Argue himself. He related no story of personal displacement. Referring to new high-rise building in Williamsburg, he stated that “the piece isn’t making a policy argument about whether that use of air rights is a good thing or not or for a neighborhood.” He did not relate that he thought his view of Brooklyn as a mecca of artists had changed. His viewpoint was more one of social activism, calling attention to an injustice he believed was affecting his neighborhood.

If there was other evidence that Argue was affected by nostalgia during his composition, perhaps there would be clues in his musical choices. Does he reach for musical styles from the past? I examine Argue’s compositional process for Brooklyn Babylon in depth in chapter three, but I can summarize some of my findings here for the purpose of this discussion.

Argue departs from traditional big band writing in many ways, but he doesn’t abandon their compositional elements completely. Rhythmically, there is an absence of traditional

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37 I’ll define traditional big band writing as being diatonic or modally based, having a Swing, Latin, or Funk feel with few meter changes, featuring sectional writing more frequently than cross-sectional writing, adhering to a 5-4-4 plus rhythm section orchestration with occasional woodwind doubling, and containing both improvised solo sections and full ensemble climaxes.
Swing in the work in favor of what saxophonist Rob Wilkerson describes as “groove-based music.” One groove was derived from a Brooklyn-based style of Rock known as Indie Rock, that was sweeping the borough during the time he was composing for Babylon. Another was borrowed from a Balkan style of music that was also being performed locally at the time of composition. The fusion of rock styles and world music with jazz is a continuing development of the genre, and not a reflection of past compositional techniques. Argue’s use of other rhythmic structures, including repetitive cells found in minimalistic and process music, are drawn from compositional devices developed in the 1960s, but continue to be used widely in contemporary musical composition.

Melodically and harmonically, diatonic and modal writing is often complemented by early twentieth-century atonal techniques. Argue utilized a pitch-class set for the bass movement under the carousel theme, but diatonic-based chord structures remain atop these progressions. This technique is also used in “The Neighborhood” where an improvised tenor sax solo follows a modal structure built over the pitch-set root movements.

Structurally, common jazz song forms such as AABA are evident, but often with uneven phrase lengths borrowed from Argue’s study of Balkan music. There are also common Jazz devices such as improvisational sections and a shout chorus. Argue makes extensive use of the Hocketing Canon, a writing technique of the Middle Ages, but updated by contemporary jazz composers such as Guillermo Klein, whom the composer stated was an influence. Thematic material linked to characters is developed to follow the trajectory of the story, a technique with roots in opera.38

For orchestration, while the core ensemble remains true to traditional big band instrumentation, the musicians are asked to double on unusual instruments, such as contrabass clarinet, alto flute, euphonium, and *tapan*. The inclusion of small group Interludes in the work, such as “Enjoin,” played on a pair of unspecified “ethnic” or “folkloric” wooden flutes, reflect street ensembles that could be found in Brooklyn at the time of composition. To portray the atmosphere of interior spaces in Žeželj’s imagery, Argue sometimes chose a particular instrument, such as clarinet, to suggest a nostalgic mood, a technique known as *topus* or a *trope*, with roots in the Romantic period.39

What one might conclude is that when Argue distanced himself from the traditional big band sound, he did so by embracing modern compositional techniques of the past. While the inclusion of older compositional styles in Jazz may not be unique to Argue, their extensive use in the writing of *Brooklyn Babylon* is noteworthy, even if the overall effect creates a very new-sounding big band composition. Stefaniya’s investigation of nostalgia in musical composition quotes an interview with trombonist and avant-garde artist Vinko Globokar as saying that any use of any older styles in postmodern music is inherently nostalgic. He is forgiving, however, if it is used for a social or political aim, a proverbial “message in a bottle.”40 Is Argue engaging in

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nostalgia by using older techniques in his writing, or is he using them as a vehicle for social commentary?

My belief is that there is little evidence of nostalgia being an influence on Argue’s creative process in *Brooklyn Babylon*. Even when using older modernist styles, I believe Argue was working on expanding his compositional palette, not engaging in nostalgia. Argue found these devices useful in support of his collaborator’s imagery, as he continued to push the boundaries of how a big band ensemble could sound. His next major composition for big band for instance, *Real Enemies*, was constructed entirely using twelve-tone techniques. A previous composition, *Habeas Corpus*, made extensive use of minimalist techniques. The blending of classical styles with jazz styles has a long history, so, in that sense, Argue is just continuing a tradition, not responding to a nostalgic impulse.

The inclusion of Indie Rock and Balkan music in the work, as well as music he heard on the streets of Brooklyn, also suggests that Argue was immersed in the contemporary rather than focused on the past. One might argue that Argue’s embracing of this music at the time he was composing *Brooklyn Babylon* was a deliberate attempt to show what might be lost to the spread of gentrification in Brooklyn, perhaps an anticipation of a future nostalgia. In our interviews, however, he never expressed his musical choices in those terms. These were the contemporary sounds of Brooklyn, and his inclusion of these styles was intended to have the audience experience the sonic landscape of the city rather than an attempt to preserve a culture that was disappearing.

As to Globokar’s “message in a bottle,” the work is indeed social commentary, but the message comes by intentionally evoking nostalgia, as previously discussed, not reacting to a nostalgic impulse.
Returning to Davies’s three classifications of nostalgia, it is clear that only the third form, eliciting nostalgia, resonates with Argue’s creative process. While using older musical styles, such as a Sousa-like march or an imitation of a carousel calliope, might seem to be nostalgic, in Argue’s hands they are devices to simultaneously prompt a collective nostalgic response in the audience while presenting its perversion in the narcissism of the Mayor. In chapter two, however, we will see a more direct influence of nostalgia on the creative process, as we delve into Žeželj’s worldview of loss, a view that contrasts sharply with Argue’s contemporary focus. How Argue composes for Žeželj’s imagery built around craftsmanship and loss will be explored more fully in chapter three.
Chapter 2

Danijel Žeželj and the Rejection of Nostalgia

I will now turn to Danijel Žeželj, examining his storyline, characters, and imagery to explore what factors may have influenced his creative process. This examination will primarily be based on my interview with the artist in August of 2018 and will focus on unpacking Žeželj’s statement on how Brooklyn Babylon is an “homage to people who work with their hands.”

This chapter will also try to discern how the artist’s background in the former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War may have affected his outlook on loss, and how the work itself may be an allegory for the experience of displaced immigrants everywhere.

Like my questioning of Argue, in speaking with Žeželj in August 2018, I was interested to learn more about his background and the significance of the imagery in the Brooklyn Babylon storyline. Understanding that Žeželj was an immigrant from Croatia, I wondered about his experience within the Croatian community in New York City. As with Argue, he showed how my approach was in error; he related that he came to New York by choice, and for that reason his experience did not align with many in the Croatian community. His immigration was based on a decision to advance his career, as he perceived his options as an artist to be limited in his native Croatia and “always had this idea that he would live somewhere else.” This parallels Argue’s vision of the “Brooklyn of the Imagination,” anticipating a kind of utopia of artists from around the world waiting there for him. Žeželj describes his motivation for the move.

Brooklyn felt more like a place where I could connect to the environment and people because it seemed like everyone who lived in Brooklyn was from somewhere else.

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\[41\] Danijel Žeželj in discussion with the author, August 7, 2018.
Žeželj was acutely aware, however, that for many immigrants, a move to New York was predicated on the necessity of escaping conditions at home:

I think for most of the immigrants, it’s very different, and I think they tend to, wherever they go, stay together with other people of a similar background, from the same country. Some people are physically forced to leave their place, so I think those experiences are very different. I would never dare to say that I belonged to this community.

Despite placing himself among those fortunate to immigrate by choice, he nevertheless built the story of *Brooklyn Babylon* around characters who did not have that choice, and indeed faced displacement again. Therefore, the story is built upon loss.

The protagonist of the *Brooklyn Babylon* is Lev Bezdomi, a master craftsman of carousel figures (Fig. 2.1). Žeželj discusses the significance of his name:

He could be a Jewish man, but it is not specific, it is someone without home. I think in Russian there is such a last name, not in Croatian, but it probably exists there.

![Fig. 2.1. Lev Bezdomi](image)

Lev’s name is derived from “bez dom,” in South Slavic languages, a phrase translating as “without a home.” We do not know his background, but he has been displaced. He is

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42 Danijel Žeželj. “Brooklyn Babylon Animations - 8 Chapters.” Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/91784256. This video is the source for this and all subsequent images used from *Brooklyn Babylon*. 
accompanied by a young child, Mara, who is in turn accompanied throughout the film by her balloon (Fig. 2.2). Žeželj discusses the symbolism of the two characters:

[Lev] is this older guy, and it could be her grandfather. He could be a symbol of wisdom and older age and someone who has seen a lot of things, and she could be someone symbolic of innocence. And also because she is a child, she could see things more clearly than he could.

Digging further into the symbolism of Lev’s character, the interview revealed that Žeželj takes a keen interest in craftsmen and workers. He states, “I could watch for hours someone who does something with his/her hands, it always fascinated me.” His portrayals of Lev often focus on his hands in the act of creation (Fig 2.3).
Lev’s craft is that of a master carpenter, but also of something very special: a carousel. It’s not clear why Žeželj chose the carousel other than that “it was something that belonged to the past,” but it also fits within the greater symbolism of a continuous circle, and time returning again and again, a concept that suggests nostalgia. Žeželj researched carousels extensively, learning that “at one moment in history it was a huge thing, and the masters who built carousels were really important and worked all the time, and had huge workshops, and had so much work (Fig. 2.4).”

Žeželj is inclusive in the tribute that he pays to workers. He depicts artisans of many professions in Brooklyn Babylon, including numerous images of construction workers building the tower, as well as workers at a machine shop and a welding shop, and a purveyor of silk. Žeželj also makes the point that the musicians in Argue’s ensemble were also craftspeople who create with their hands, bringing the production’s soundtrack to life. I would add that Žeželj himself, both as the painter of images for the film and the live painter on stage, also falls into this category, as does Argue, copying music by hand and working as the conductor of his big band.

What was most striking in my interview with Žeželj, however, was his recurring and compelling focus on the decline of manual labor as a significant loss to society. His comments
centered on this loss. He related that he could watch “manual laborers like masons or carpenters for hours on end,” and that this kind of work is not “respected anymore” and is “almost gone.” He lamented that “all of those small business, where people work with their hands, could also be gone.” Continuing, he observed that New York “was once an industrial city, but after WWII it declined. Wall Street became the focus and everything now is to serve that—nothing has been made in New York for a long time.” And most symbolic of the loss of craftsmanship for him, was carousel building. It is “something that is completely gone,” and, he said, “I don’t know if today [there is] anyone [who] exists that could build carousels.”

So, in consideration of Žeželj’s comments, can these views be evidence of a nostalgic influence on the artist’s creative process? Although we can’t know Žeželj’s emotional state while painting his images for sure, the strong and frequent use of his language emphasizing the decline of the manual laborer during my interview leads me to believe that this outlook would have affected Žeželj creative choices. This conclusion is reinforced by Žeželj’s building of the storyline around the lost craft of carousel-making, the detailing of Lev’s hands at work at this craft, and the many other choices made highlighting craftspersons throughout the work.

Is there other evidence that could be considered in determining whether nostalgia was an influence in Žeželj’s creative process? The answer to this question lies in the other main character in the story—Ana, of Ana’s Coffee. This character, like the other shopkeepers in the story, is a small business owner, and as she makes coffee and pastries, her actions are also those of a worker using their hands. But her significance goes deeper for Žeželj. Ana is representative of his mother. In our conversation, Žeželj said, “there was this restaurant, this cafe, [where] my Mom used to cook, [and ] I thought, if she were to go somewhere and be an immigrant, she would probably be a cook or [be] making coffee or cakes in someplace.” In the story, Ana’s
Coffee is depicted as a very peaceful, welcoming place with warm coffee and pastries and multiple pictures on the wall suggesting connections with the past. Ana’s Coffee is symbolic both as a kind of home—or a connection to a lost homeland—for Lev and Mara, and a source of cultural identity for the neighborhood (Fig. 2.5).

Memories of Žeželj’s mother clearly were at work in formulating the character of Ana, and empathy, if not first-hand knowledge of displaced peoples, surely influenced the overall storyline of the work. In this regard, Žeželj’s work exemplifies Davies’s second type of nostalgic phenomenon (see chapter one), in which an artist is influenced by nostalgia during their creative process.

Another important aspect of Žeželj’s creative process that could be investigated in light of nostalgia in *Brooklyn Babylon* is the timelessness of the imagery. In fact, a conscious decision early on to obscure a specific historic time for the story was a goal for both artists.

The idea was that the time in *Brooklyn Babylon* was not defined as much, although clearly, it’s today, and it could be today, but there are also a lot of elements of the past, and elements of the possible future.
Žeželj places his audience adrift in time, sampling images from Brooklyn, but also scenes that are common to any American city. An examination of the first episode, “The Neighborhood,” reveals this concept.

Žeželj described his imagery in the opening of the work as “specific and symbolic to Brooklyn, [but a place that] would not be found on a tourist map.” He captures old industrial landmarks: water towers, warehouses, the Kentile Floors steel girder sign, as well as more iconic structures, like the Brooklyn Bridge and the Williamsburg bank building. These images also reflect an interest in the past. (Fig. 2.6).

![Kentile Floors old industrial sign](image)

As the street scenes unfold, we see some men and women in hats and boys in caps, as would have been common in the 1920s, aligning with Žeželj’s visual image the first time he listened to Argue’s music. There is a boy speeding on a bike, children squinting through a candy store window. A movie marquee features a classic film from the 1920s and from the 1970s. Automobiles are few, parked, and of non-descript model or lineage. There are small businesses—a florist, a furniture store, a boxing gym—but no national brands or neon signs. For the street fair, there is a balloon seller, an artist, a man on stilts, street musicians, and a young
girl pointing excitedly while holding her father’s hand. There are no phones depicted. The overall state of technology is unclear. Its imagery is that of both a small town and urban Americana simultaneously (Fig. 2.7).

In Argue’s view, this neighborhood depiction captured a “real polyglot meeting place for immigrant communities of all different cultures and creative individuals and people looking for some sense of community with neighborhood institutions.” This concept was an important one for the story, as it highlights the contrast to the self-centered mindset of the Mayor.

But more fundamental than the choice of images is the medium of the artwork itself. The work is in black and white, and the images unfold as a series of drawings that reveal increasing detail, but not motion, a technique known as stop animation. Žeželj calls this format a graphic novel, as there are no captions or subtitles to convey the storyline. The absence of film technology prevents the public from time-dating the work in terms of animation, color, computer-generated graphics, sound effects, or other techniques that movie-goers rely on for orientation.
The imagery in “The Neighborhood,” then, serves two purposes: the first is to introduce the audience to the main characters and the Brooklyn community that will form the backdrop of the story, and the second is to invite the audience into a fantasy world where the imagery is familiar but the date is uncertain. The audience might compile this imagery into a universalist Americana cityscape where nothing seems out of place, even if it is not congruent in time. This is a curious kind of nostalgic vision, one rooted in the familiar, generating common recognition in the audience, but disconnected from any actual historic time stamp.

The antithesis of this communal nostalgia is revealed in the episode “The Tallest Tower in the World,” where we first meet the character of the Mayor, and are introduced to imagery that represents his identity. As stated in chapter one, Žeželj describes him as “not a mean guy, actually charming, but not someone who does good or cares about the same things as the people of the neighborhood.” He sports a large mustache, big smile, and bold cufflinks emblazoned with a large “M”, and he extends his hand to Lev⁴³ (Fig. 2.8). In the scene, Lev is shown with his hand over his heart as he is honored by the Mayor’s commission to build a carousel to top the tower. Mara, however, is suspicious of the Mayor’s aspirations.

⁴³ Argue criticizes this “glad handing” in the 2017 interview.
I have described in some detail in the previous chapter the imagery of the Mayor, his parade, and exclusive garden party in “Grand Opening” as representative of the display of nostalgia as power. That episode shows the contrast between the Mayor’s values and those of the neighborhood. But what of the Mayor’s building and the tower itself? What can be learned from their architecture, and is there another influence at work in Žeželj’s creative process that is not rooted in nostalgic Americana.

Žeželj was born in the former Yugoslavia. He was raised and educated there before the breakup of that country. The influence of a communist doctrine that elevates the status of workers may be part of his outlook on the decline of manual and industrial labor, but it was never expressed in those terms in my interviews. Having lived through the breakup and the Bosnian war that followed, one could connect his sense of loss to real experience.

Lindstrom, in her discussion of nostalgia in the former Yugoslavia, describes conflicting views of the breakup of the country. Some, hoping to restore the “best” of the past, lament that conditions in the former Yugoslavia seemed better than those in the present. They point to the freedom of movement that was possible between republics, and a belief in a unified big, beautiful country, expressing nostalgia for former dictator Tito. The view of others is more reflective, shunning imagery of the socialist republic, but embracing a kind of Yugonostalgia. This nostalgia can include a fascination with “old Yugoslavs” cultural symbols such as phonograph records or films, but not wishing for reunification” and “embracing a closer connection to the European West.” Again, it was not clear from our interview where Žeželj’s sympathies lie.

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An image that led me to learn what I could of Žeželj’s background appears at the end of the episode “Construction/Deconstruction.” The image depicts the giant hook and ball of a construction crane hanging over a neighborhood lying at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge. In my thinking, the similarity of this image to the hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag was striking, and it is notable that this scene was chosen for the cover of the CD of the soundtrack (Figs. 2.9, 2.10). This ominous image captures the essence of *Brooklyn Babylon*: a neighborhood helpless in the face of authoritarian power. The hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag represent “urban industrial workers and agricultural workers building the Soviet state,” an aspect of state socialism common to all countries of the former Soviet bloc, but I don’t think that this is Žeželj’s meaning of the hook and ball here. It is more the destruction of the present to build a monument to power.

![Image from episode “Construction/Deconstruction”](https://example.com/image.png)

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The late Svetlana Boym’s account of the architectural history of the site where Moscow’s new Cathedral of Christ the Savior now stands is instructive. Originally, this was the site of a “small … seventeenth-century convent of rare old Russian architecture,” but as the convent was located prominently “on the hills overlooking the Moscow River,” Tsar Nicholas I seized the site so he could build the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Supposedly this cathedral was funded by “the people” but it was instead privately funded as a monument to the Tsar. In 1931, Stalin also “eyed the site for its prominence” and wished to remove this symbol of the Tsarist past. So, in 1931 he blew up the cathedral, ostensibly to build the Palace of the Soviets, a building to rival the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty.

The Palace was to be a monument to communism and atheism topped with a massive statue of Lenin, the new savior, eclipsing in size the massive cross that topped the cathedral of the Tsar. Except for the foundation, the building of the Palace was never completed due to the Second World War, and it remained an open scar in the landscape until the world’s largest

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heated swimming pool was built in 1957 on the old foundation. Although popular with the public, the new mayor of Moscow nevertheless deemed the swimming pool insufficient for the prominent site, and in 1994, destroyed it to build a replica of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in concrete as a “monument to the unity and repentance of the Russian people.” However, the workers on the project looked at it differently, deeming it “an Egyptian Pyramid,” and “lamented that the money would have been better spent on social needs and the repair of existing churches.”

Boym makes the point that the new Cathedral represented “continuities with power structures and authoritarian fantasies” of the past.” This is the essence of nationalist restorative nostalgia.

I related that I had learned from Argue that Žeželj had grown up in the former Yugoslavia, and asked him if he had anything that he would like to share about that experience or if there were Soviet influences in the work (relating my view of the similarity of the Soviet flag to the image in “Construction/Deconstruction”). He did not address the image directly or relate anything personal about his experiences, but alluded to totalitarianism by referring to his drawing of the Mayor’s building. He pointed out the “huge entrance to the Mayor’s,” as “being totally out of proportion to the tiny, tiny people,” and that this building and the Mayor’s plan for the tower are examples “belonging to Soviet totalitarian architecture and symbols of power,” not “something you are doing for the people or something that will serve anyone (Fig. 2.11).”

48 Ibid., 105-106.
49 Ibid., 107.
He continued with a telling example related to the changes in New York:

There was one building in NY that reminded me of totalitarian architecture and in building on Wall Street. It has these massive columns and it is kind of impressive, but it is also completely out of proportion, so the idea was obviously to give you this feeling of power (Fig. 2.12).

It is clear that Žeželj is deeply critical of the power representative in Soviet-style architecture, and the tower he designs for the story is representative of this view.

Žeželj’s design for The Tower of Brooklyn came from two sources: antiquity and Soviet art of the Constructivist era. He was influenced both by Bruegel’s painting of the Tower of Babel and Tatlin’s Tower for the Monument to the Third International. Each was a monument to power, but the first was never completed and the other was never built.

The Tower of Babel story comes from the Old Testament, Genesis 11:1-9. To paraphrase the story, the descendants of Noah settled on a plain in Shinar and decided to build a city with a tower “that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.” The Lord, displeased, “confused” their language, making it impossible for them to understand one another and complete the tower, and ”scattered them from there all over the earth.”

The painter Bruegel famously painted the tower as the circular ziggurat shown in the photo below. It is interesting to note that the neighborhoods of Brooklyn do indeed speak many languages, but Žeželj did not indicate in our interview why he chose this picture as inspiration (Fig. 2.13).

![Fig. 2.13. Bruegel’s (Little) Tower of Babel](https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/the-tower-of-babel/oALSLk-il3ULLQ)

Tatlin’s Tower was designed as a massive structure to be built in St. Petersburg, (Petrograd) spanning the River Neva, as part of Lenin’s “Monumental Propaganda,” a campaign

51 Gen. 11:1-9, Revised Standard Version.
to replace monuments reflecting the tsarist period with structures reflecting the new ideologies.

Tatlin constructed an abstract tower that would house the headquarters for the Third International, the international organization of Communist Parties dedicated to promoting world revolution. Each of the four rotating cylinders within the tower would house a department of government. In descending order of size from the bottom, these were the legislature, the executive, the press bureau, and at the top, the radio station. Žeželj’s “Tower of Brooklyn” incorporates the design features of both historic structures into a futuristic spiraling skyscraper that features its own rotating cylinder, that of the carousel at the top (Figs. 2.14, 2.15).

![Fig. 2.14. Tatin’s Tower - model](image1)

![Fig. 2.15. Carousel topping “Tower of Brooklyn”](image2)

Parallels between the Tower of Brooklyn and the monuments built in Moscow are striking. Each razed an existing community to display authoritarian power, and each topped their monument with a symbol of that power. The Tsar’s cross was a symbol of himself as the embodiment of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and the Spirit of the People” and Stalin’s statue of Lenin

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was to show the “enlightened path to mankind,” while the second cathedral’s cross represented “a symbol of national repentance.” The Mayor’s carousel, crowning his tower, had its own symbolism as the ultimate in retro consumption, but like Stalin’s plans for the Palace of Soviets, he had ambitions of outdoing his predecessors. The Mayor designed his tower to be far greater than other historic monuments, as shown in the slide below, which the Mayor displays to Lev in the episode “The Tallest Tower in the World” (Fig. 2.16).

![Fig. 2.16. Mayor’s “Tallest Tower in the World”](image)

Measuring 1000 meters high—a full kilometer—the structure is well beyond anything ever built. I believe the scale of the tower reflects Žeželj’s strong, negative views toward displays of power.

The idea of building the tallest tower is something where you are making a symbol of power. You’re not doing something for the people; you are not doing something that will serve anyone. For a long time, skyscrapers were symbolic of the most powerful nations, so wherever there was the highest skyscraper, well, they’re the best. So now today, the highest skyscraper is in the desert, which is completely absurd, because the purpose of skyscrapers is that since you have limited space, you build higher. It’s just bizarre, but it still exists as a symbol [of power].

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Although the Tower of Brooklyn in the story has greater universal meaning for Žeželj, its purpose in *Brooklyn Babylon* was as a metaphor for the gentrification and displacement happening in the borough. Argue clarified this symbolism as follows:

the issues that we are dealing [with] are more metaphorical in nature … talking about … [the] displacement [of] existing long-time established neighborhood institutions to build up new. That happens through [the] process of gentrification as opposed to a literal demolition. So we are externalizing some of these things for dramatic effect in the show. But the thing that we’re concerned about is the erosion of the neighborhoods and the displacement of peoples, primarily, and that gets externalized in the way we tell this particular story.

Similar to his view of the decline of craftsmen, Žeželj’s perspective regarding the abuse of power profoundly influenced his creative process for *Brooklyn Babylon*. As a symbol of the changes happening in Brooklyn, this view also resonates with Argue’s criticism of the Mayor’s corruption of nostalgia. Nevertheless, it carries an undertone that is much darker than Argue’s, and hints at a larger world of social injustice,

Žeželj’s characters and imagery reflect the personal experience that influenced his creative process for *Brooklyn Babylon*. But what of the storyline itself? Is this a nostalgic tale?

Utilizing Tannock’s concepts and terminology for evaluating nostalgia, the view of the community shown in “The Neighborhood” episode at the beginning of the work could be interpreted as a pre-lapsian world. It is Argue’s utopian “Brooklyn of the Imagination.” The mayor’s destruction of the neighborhood to build his tower is the “cut” or discontinuity. The displaced residents of the neighborhood gather on Coney Island at the end of the story to build a new community revolving around the transformation of Lev’s carousel into the new Ana Coffee. The new café represents continuity between the past and the present. Symbolically, the carousel flies between past and present, representing both the journey of the displaced people and a source of cultural continuity that is retrievable. In this sense, the ending is a kind of “restorative
nostalgia,” in Boym’s terms, as a rebuilding of the neighborhood’s identity takes place around the restoration of Ana’s Coffee, a monument (albeit a small one) to the past (Fig. 2.17).

For Boym, restorative nostalgia is often mired in nationalist agendas and is thus a negative process; however, as the neighborhood is actively engaged in retrieval of a continuity with their past, I believe that Tannock’s statement about restorative nostalgia sometimes delivering positive results may be applicable to one reading of the Brooklyn Babylon storyline.

This return to the past to read a historical continuity of struggle, identity, and community … is a resource and strategy central to the struggles of all cultural and social groups. Nostalgia here works to retrieve the past for support in building the future (Tannock 1993:459).

Despite the restoration of Ana’s Coffee, however, Žeželj posits the whole of the story of Brooklyn Babylon as representative of a past that is not retrievable:

This is not a happy ending, even if you say there is this small victory for Lev and this one part of the neighborhood. But at the end, the idea is that something has been lost forever and it’s not going to come back.
Near the end of the film, two images make concrete Žeželj’s stark view. Mara lets her balloon go, and with it her child-like innocence, and Lev, sitting on the sand, stares blankly across the ocean waves (Figs. 2.18 and 2.19).

Simultaneously, Žeželj begins to paint over, in black, the mural of Lev, Mara, Brooklyn, and the neighborhood that he has been creating throughout the production.

For Žeželj, it is the discontinuity that is the focus. The new Ana’s Coffee is beside the point. The audience gasps as his beautiful mural disappears, leaving them disoriented and unsettled. The audience was happy with the new Ana’s Coffee, but Žeželj has no intention of letting them think that this fantasy nostalgia is acceptable. Lindstrom states that “reflective nostalgia restlessly grapples with the dislocation so palpable in the former Yugoslavia in order to imagine creative possibilities for the future.”

Žeželj begrudgingly accepts the creative possibilities of this stance but, as the remarks below indicate, would much prefer a world where they were not needed as often.

And I think there is something about understanding that . . . because once you understand the loss, the real loss of something, then you are going to be more careful about everything because you do realize that once something is gone, it’s not going to come

back. So I really did want to emphasize that feeling of something being destroyed and being lost.

For Žeželj, once a resource is lost, like a master craftsman of carousel figures or a community of peoples, it is gone forever. This loss is not a “continuity,” in Tannock’s terminology, that can be brought into the present. *Brooklyn Babylon* is not about bringing back the carousel maker. As any continuity is relegated to the past, it may seem that Žeželj is more tolerant of reflective nostalgia, but Žeželj does not look backward to dwell in some lost world. Lev lost his profession, his workshop, his tools, possibly even his identity. He is again bez domi, without a home. The last scene of the work is the Coney Island amusement park off in the distance with the Tower of Brooklyn looming behind it. The Mayor has won. The Tower of Brooklyn will stand until the next institution of power wants to replace it with something else (Fig. 2.20).

![Fig. 2.20. Tower of Brooklyn dominates the landscape](image)

If Žeželj wanted the story to be characterized by restorative nostalgia, he would not have painted over his onstage mural in black. He would have depicted Lev, Mara, Ana, and the
displaced residents smiling around the new shop. Ana may make coffee again, but Lev will never make another carousel figure. Žeželj emphasizes discontinuity over continuity, the cut of dislocation, to make a simple point: precious things can be lost and we need to be more careful. Furthermore, he wants us to feel what it is like to lose something precious. He does this by painting over his mural. The audience was fascinated throughout the performance by the artistic skill that Žeželj demonstrated, with his hands, at painting. They cherished it when it was complete, and were astonished and saddened by its loss. They did not anticipate its destruction. In this small way, Žeželj makes his point felt by the audience in performance, not as simply observed by them.

The loss of work done with the hands, and the connection of Ana’s character to his mother, shows how nostalgia influenced Žeželj. Nostalgia was also evident in the timeless images from urban and small-town America he used to construct his setting for the story. Another influence was his keen understanding of how monuments to power can profoundly affect the common people, metaphorically constructing the “Tallest Tower in the World,” supporting Argue’s critique of the Mayor’s nostalgic display of power and the gentrification happening in Brooklyn’s neighborhoods. However, perhaps the greatest influence on Žeželj’s creative process in the work may not lie in nostalgia, but in a deeper understanding of loss. This understanding—having witnessed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the war that followed—guided Žeželj to produce a work that issues a stark warning to the audience that loss can be permanent, and one must always stay vigilant.

The next chapter will illustrate how these various social critiques are expressed through Argue’s musical devices in the work’s soundtrack.
Chapter 3

Scoring the Cautionary Tale: An Analysis of Darcy James Argue’s Musical Solutions to
Danijel Žeželj’s imagery in *Brooklyn Babylon*

In this chapter, I examine Argue’s artistic choices in creating music for *Brooklyn Babylon*. I discuss Argue’s sources of inspiration, which include elements drawn from twentieth-century modern music, big band and contemporary jazz styles, popular music trends, and contemporary Balkan music. Musical elements, including melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, and texture, will be analyzed, especially as they serve to enhance Žeželj’s imagery or reflect aspects of his creative process, highlighted in chapter two. Special consideration will be given to elements that “sound” various landscapes, thereby imparting multiple layers of symbolism in the music. I will limit my analytical focus to five of the work’s key episodes: “The Neighborhood,” “An Invitation,” “The Tallest Tower in the World,” “Missing Parts,” and “Coney Island.” The “Prologue” and Interludes will also be included as they show Argue’s creative process at work during moments in the production that are without imagery.

The Artists’ Collaborative Process

When Argue created the music for *Brooklyn Babylon*, he was not composing a soundtrack for a completed film. Rather, the music unfolded alongside the creative process of his collaborator, Danijel Žeželj. Argue related that Žeželj had “created the storyline, and sketched out a few ideas of what some of the characters, the tower, and carousel looked like,” so Argue had “the outline, but the actual expression of it came from Danijel.”

Žeželj’s creative method was to start with a 4-foot by 4-foot piece of plywood painted in white, and then make a few paint strokes in black, take a picture, then more strokes and pictures
until a frame was complete. The results were later assembled in Final Cut Pro software to create the animation for the film. Argue would see a completed frame of an important moment, called a keyframe, and then another keyframe to see where the story was going, but the amount of time between these moments was not yet determined. Argue would then write a sequence of music linking the two keyframes. In this way, he described how he could “decide musically how long those moments needed to take,” and this gave him “the freedom to take the amount of time that he thought each idea needed.” Afterwards, he would send his composed sequence back to Žeželj, and the artist would then create all the intermediate frames and decide on the pacing.

Argue elaborates:

So, in this strange way, he had the mock of the music and would decide on the pacing from image to image . . . . Sometimes, Danijel would look at it and say “that doesn’t work,” and so we would try some different things, and sometimes we would need more music [or decide] this needs less music to tighten things up.

Argue continued his description of the process with an example from “The Neighborhood.” “It begins in the clouds, a birds-eye view of Brooklyn, … and we descend, and finally arrive at street level and, obviously, there is a musical change that needs to happen there.” Other musical changes in the episode were required as the visuals moved from the street scenes into Lev’s carousel workshop and Ana’s Coffee. Each environment had a different mood, and as Argue observes, this created particular compositional challenges for him:

So, these musical changes need[ed] to be reflected in the emotional texture of the music, and in order to make them all comprehensible to the audience, these changes of style and mood and orchestration and atmosphere etc., [had to] sound like they belong together.

In the pages that follow, I will examine in more detail the compositional devices utilized by Argue to reflect these shifts in acoustical space and mood in this and other episodes. In addition, I will consider the social significance of Argue’s musical choices, both within the musical
culture of Brooklyn and in relation to Žeželj’s larger worldview of loss. Finally, I will explore how Argue knitted together his choices to form a cohesive narrative and acoustical experience for the audience that follows the trajectory of the tale and Žeželj’s outlook on nostalgia.

“The Neighborhood”: Setting the Scene in Brooklyn Babylon

For the opening sequence in this episode that takes the audience from a birds-eye view of Brooklyn progressively down to the street, Argue deployed a Minimalist compositional device that he first used in his big band composition Habeas Corpus (Ex. 3.1). This device involves repeated rhythmic units that pass through the ensemble, creating different orchestrational textures.

Ex. 3.1. Habeas Corpus Minimalist example
Minimalism in music developed from a similar trend in the art world around 1960 and involved the multiple repetition of small units. Minimalism is closely related to process music, in which the listener can clearly hear how the elements of a composition gradually transform themselves into something new and different over time. In *Habeas Corpus*, the repeated sixteenth-note unit forms the basis of the process. The listener readily hears the repeated rhythm and can follow its development as it moves through the orchestration.

In “The Neighborhood,” a repeating eighth-note unit is used for similar effect. The eighth notes begin high in the piano, reflecting the opening scene in the clouds. As the imagery descends, lower open fifth intervals enter, rising and falling dynamically underneath the high pulse. Each interval entrance outlines a key center lasting from five to six measures. Beginning in sync with the high pulse, these intervallic motives begin to oscillate between strict and syncopated eighth-note figures. Various sections of the ensemble enter in turn, following the harmonic progression evident in the piano, creating an increasingly dense texture. Fortepiano whole notes in the solo trumpets, reinforced by hits on the drum-set cymbals, pierce this texture. The increasing complexity and stepwise harmonic rhythm nicely parallel the growing detail of the imagery as the neighborhood slowly comes into focus. After moving through the descending key centers of E, D, C, B♭, and E♭, Argue ends his minimalist progression with a uniform crescendo in the ensemble to accented whole notes in the final A♭ tonality, synchronizing the music with the imagery arriving at street level, an image of the Brooklyn Bridge. From there the

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57 Bonds, 602.
imagery moves to scenes of the neighborhood’s streets, and the music takes a distinctive turn in rhythmic feel (Ex. 3.2, 3.3).

Ex. 3.2. Process music in “The Neighborhood”
Ex. 3.3. “The Neighborhood” – landing point
This continuous Minimalist pulse device is difficult for the performers, as they must be aware of their own technical control, and the balance within their section, while other instruments play opposing dynamics and enter at different times. Rob Wilkerson, Argue’s second alto sax player, described this difficulty as follows.

[Argue’s] piece *Habeas Corpus* has this kind of minimalist Steve Reich continuous sixteenth-note rhythm passing through the band, starting in the piano and guitar and then processing through the winds and horns, and that was a challenge (see Fig 3.1). He obviously refined and revisited it in a much more challenging way in *Brooklyn Babylon*. So, right off the bat [in “The Neighborhood”], it’s an eighth-note thing, and traveling against [this] are these eighth-note hemiola things . . . That’s hard because you’re playing an instrument double [flute], and [it’s difficult] to hear. Because you’re maybe 15 feet away [from the other sections]. (Author: The ensemble was arranged in a circle on stage.).

From the opening keyframe in the clouds to the landing keyframe on the street, Argue utilized a relentlessly building eighth-note texture to generate anticipation for the revealing of the narrative’s location as Brooklyn. Now at ground level, Argue must create a new mood reflecting Žeželj’s street imagery.

In analyzing his music for this environment, we must look at a popular music trend created in Brooklyn in the early 2000s that lasted through the time when *Brooklyn Babylon* was composed in 2012. This was Indie Rock, and it was a profound influence on both Argue and the members of his band. It is from the energy of this music that Argue creates the atmosphere of the street.

In 2011, when Argue was composing for the work, Indie Rock was the cultural pulse of the borough. Argue described Brooklyn as the “epicenter of the Indie Rock universe.” “This very influential music scene,” he continued, “sprang up in the Williamsburg neighborhood doing really creative and interesting music.” Argue stated that “the bringing in of some of those musical elements into *Brooklyn Babylon* was a natural thing to do.” He described this Indie
Rock culture as a “silent signifier” or common understanding of what people in the musical community experienced in 2011 Brooklyn, and the sound of the borough at that time was very much bound up in the sounds of these bands.”

For Argue, the inclusion of Indie Rock was more than just a vehicle to reflect the energy of the street in “The Neighborhood”; it was representative of what hearing this music meant to the musical culture in Brooklyn at the time of the composition. This cultural awareness through music is captured in a theory developed by anthropologist Steven Feld called acoustemology, which concerns how we know our world through sound. Feld noted the historical emphasis in European thought that positioned sight, and visual knowledge, as the primary sense. This preoccupation with the visible world has customarily been reinforced by the scientific community, where it is the observable that could be empirically verified. But Feld asked, what of the other senses? Do we not also know of the world through sound?

Feld worked with the native people of Bosavi, New Guinea and found that as the dense rainforest around them limited what could be seen, their sense of their world through sound became particularly acute. He created a new term, acoustemology, which considers “sonic presence and awareness as a potent force in how people make sense of experiences,” and that concerns how “the experience of a place can be grounded in an acoustic dimension.” Even more relevant to our discussion of Indie Rock in *Brooklyn Babylon* is Feld’s study of jazz music in Ghana, where he found an intimate knowledge of American Jazz through recordings was

59 Steven Feld, *Waterfalls of Song*, 97.
combined or reimagined through local music traditions, popular trends, and native instruments to create a new acoustemological understanding of the world for the musicians and their listeners.60

The influence of Indie Rock was not limited to Argue’s inclusion of the style in “The Neighborhood,” but was also inherent in the expression of it by his band members. In asking Rob Wilkerson about Indie Rock influence in the work and how the musicians view it, he pointed to their innate understanding of the style as part of the Brooklyn experience. He noted that, if the work were to be played by musicians in another city, their approach to playing the rock sections in Argue’s score may be different.

It is a big part of his music for sure. It’s not something that he has talked a lot about. I think for a lot of us, it’s kind of a common thread, so he doesn’t necessarily need to say, “this is how to approach this [music].” Of course, this is how we approach [it], but if you are in any city that is not NY, you play a rock tune, and maybe it’s going to be fusion [style]—that’s where their mind goes.

In combination with Žeželj’s imagery of the neighborhood, the inclusion of this rock music, and its communal expression by the musicians, created for the audience both a visual and acoustemological sense of the place. The driving beat represents both the underlying pulse of the borough, that Argue describes, and the energy of the new visual environment. The Brooklyn landscape was not just painted, it was “sounded,” and this concept would be integral to other choices Argue made in his creative process throughout the work (Ex. 3.4).

Ex. 3.4. Indie Rock beat in “The Neighborhood”

Although this Rock beat is the foundation of the street scene music, this section also has a distinctive Jazz character. Over the beat, Argue chose a Tenor Sax solo to soar over the driving Rock feel. The choice of the Tenor Sax to complement the energy of the music was yet another way for Argue to “sound” the landscape of a Brooklyn street. Street musicians are a common sight in Brooklyn and, indeed, Žeželj includes a frame of a brass band in his montage of the street characters (Fig. 3.1). The tenor sax is particularly iconic of the street musician sound in Brooklyn, having a mythology that includes Jazz saxophonist legend Sonny Rollins practicing at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge. Argue will pay significant homage to street musicians in the Interludes of *Brooklyn Babylon*, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

![Fig. 3.1. Street musicians](image)

The Sax solo is written out at first, but then evolves into an improvised space over a return of the Minimalist texture of the opening. The harmonic scheme of the tenor solo reflects a modern trend in jazz writing, specifically plateau modal jazz, defined by a slow harmonic rhythm with no clear key center[^61] (see Ex. 3.5). By incorporating slow key center changes and the eighth-note texture writing, Argue connects this street music to the slow harmonic rhythm in the

opening sequence. As will be discussed later, the harmonic scheme also relates to that of the “Prologue” and “Coney Island,” which also facilitate the cohesiveness of the work.

As the street scene ends, the imagery turns to Lev Bezdomni’s Carousel Shop, but before discussing this musical change, I would like to skip ahead to the return of the street imagery that occurs as Lev and Mara leave his shop. The music depicts a street fair. Argue describes this musical change:
We leave the studio and they go outside and there is a big street fair, like the one called Atlantic Antic that happens on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn every year. And there are always big crowds and people selling funnel cakes on the street and sort of hawking clothing, there’s a gospel choir.

To convey the excitement of the fair, Argue again returns to the Indie Rock beat, but this time he adds even more energy to the atmosphere. To communicate this, Argue turns to another jazz writing device, that of the big band shout chorus.

The shout chorus is the climactic section of a big band composition where all the winds of the ensemble, often punctuated by the drum set, will play a soli over the harmonic structure of the work. An example of this can be seen below in an excerpt from the author’s *Three-Step Blues*.

Ex. 3.6. Shout chorus (mm. 95–106) in *Three-Step Blues*, composed by Karen Blackall

*Blues*, in which the entire ensemble is scored together, building to the dynamic climax of the piece (Ex. 3.6).
In Argue’s shout chorus, the most powerful elements of the ensemble, the trumpets, upper trombones, soprano saxophone and piccolo are combined for a *tour de force* soli over the texture. Argue “kitchen sinks” this moment by combining the Indie Rock beat with a searing electric guitar, the driving minimalist pulse of “The Neighborhood,” and drum hits reinforcing the rhythm of the shout (Ex. 3.7). The cumulative effect constitutes the emotional climax of the episode, reflecting Mara’s excitement at the spectacle (Fig. 3.2).

Fig 3.2. Lev and Mara at the street fair
Ex. 3.7. Shout chorus excerpt (mm. 169-172) in “The Neighborhood”
Returning to the musical change that moves the drama from the street into Lev’s carousel workshop, Argue is faced with creating a contrast in atmosphere. Lev’s workshop is a large space, big enough to hold several carousel horses, but only two solitary figures will enter the scene—Lev and Mara. They appear with eyes looking down at the floor where Lev has painted the logo for his shop. This downward glance may represent the fact that Lev does not have much work. Argue chooses an intimate solo clarinet with light woodwind accompaniment in a 3/4 waltz-like meter to create the quiet mood of this space. The slow waltz is similar in feel to the carousel theme in “Grand Opening,” discussed in chapter one, and the bass clarinet plays the theme itself as a counter line. The waltz begins as a carousel is shown at the back of the shop and continues as images of wooden carousel horses are revealed. The music concludes as the characters are introduced.

Throughout the work, Argue features the clarinet to represent Lev in his shop. In “The Neighborhood,” the clarinet sets the mood. In “An Invitation,” Argue chooses a pair of clarinets to depict Lev at work, and in “Builders” the solo clarinet returns for Lev’s dream sequence. This brings back the discussion from chapter one of topoi as cultural signifiers. Does the clarinet imply something today similar to the horn in Bruckner’s time, that is, melancholy and nostalgia, and did Argue choose this instrument to represent Lev Bezdomni for that reason? The evidence is not clear.

In American society, the clarinet is heard in many contexts. It has often been associated with different styles of jazz, such as traditional jazz (Dixieland) or 1930s swing bands, such as those led by clarinetist Benny Goodman, but Argue does not compose in a jazz style for the

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scenes in Lev’s shop. It is also a common solo instrument heard in orchestral music. Rimsky-Korsakov in his well-known treatise *Principles of Orchestration* suggests that the clarinet is “pliable and expressive”, capable of expressing “joy or contemplative character or expressions of mirth” in major keys, and “sad and reflective melodies” or “impassioned” passages in minor keys. Argue’s clarinet melody here is in the minor mode, suggesting reflection, and its rise in register gives it an impassioned quality, but its embellished nature falls outside common orchestral playing practices. This embellished style of clarinet playing, featuring many turns and grace notes, is more characteristic of some musical styles found among New York City’s Jewish and eastern European immigrant communities. One common example is Jewish klezmer music, where this kind of embellishment is integral to the performance. If Argue has indeed borrowed from this style, it aligns with Žeželj’s description of the protagonist: “He could be a Jewish man, but it is not specific, it is someone without a home.” But embellishment is common in many eastern European musical styles, and Argue will borrow heavily from another popular in Brooklyn in the “Prologue.”

Given the versatility of the clarinet in music heard by Americans today, it is doubtful that the audience would react to the clarinet in a universal way. There was also no indication from Argue in our conversations that he chose the instrument to induce a specific emotion in the listener, but it is clear that he found the solo instrument useful for reflecting the mood changes when the imagery turned to Lev’s workshop. The klezmer-style embellishments in the clarinet, for me, implies melancholy, along with the sense of pride that Lev has for his craft. The minor key reflects the former and the dramatic ascending lines the latter.

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This total effect of Argue’s music in this scene is a stark contrast to the high-energy communal excitement of the street scene. Here we find separation, quiet reflection, melancholy. The solo clarinet and slow waltz support the idea of Lev being bezdomni, an immigrant displaced, “without a home” (Ex. 3.8).

Ex. 3.8. Clarinet theme for Lev’s workshop

We next turn to the musical change that occurs as Lev and Mara leave the street fair and enter Ana’s Coffee Shop. As discussed previously in chapter two, Ana is symbolic of Žeželj’s mother, and what he thought her occupation might be as an immigrant. Žeželj’s images of her shop are warm and welcoming. There is happiness here, as evident from the smiles on Mara and Ana’s faces, and the hint of one on Lev’s, the only time we see this in the film.
Argue orchestrates this scene with an airy theme in the flutes and muted trumpets built upon a pyramid accompaniment in muted low trombones and clarinets (Fig. 3.11). This light texture creates a peaceful atmosphere, as compared to the raw energy of the street fair. The melody is shared among the instruments, conveying a communal feel, in contrast to the solo clarinet of Lev’s shop. Argue plays with metric displacement through changing time signatures, moving the occurrences of the melody and the accompaniment to different locations within the measures, distorting a sense of regular time. Groups of fifteen eighth notes (7+8) in the pyramid accompaniment are spaced over the changing meters. This creative idea relates to Argue’s study of Balkan music, which will be discussed later regarding the “Prologue” (Ex. 3.9).

Ex. 3.9. Ana’s Coffee theme in “The Neighborhood” with metric displacement of accompaniment

The halting, uneven character of this music plays with the idea that the story takes place in an indefinite time. The ascending pyramids imply a growing emotional attachment to Ana’s
for Lev and Mara, perhaps a communal nostalgia for an old homeland, or a feeling they have found a new home. Argue closes this section with the melody resolving in whole notes over the 15-note pyramids as the final image of the episode, an aerial image of the neighborhood at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, comes in view. This is Argue’s neighborhood in its pure, innocent form, the idealized Brooklyn of Žeželj’s and Argue’s imagination.

In “The Neighborhood,” we have seen how the artists’ cooperative creative process laid the foundation on which the story of *Brooklyn Babylon* was built. The establishment of the location, the energy of the neighborhood, and the introduction of the characters were all established here. Argue utilized multiple musical styles to reflect the imagery and different environments that Žeželj created, including minimalist and process techniques for the descent into Brooklyn, Indie Rock for the neighborhood and street fair, and intimate orchestration for the interior spaces. The Indie Rock sequences serve not only to capture the energy of the street scenes, but to “sound” the Brooklyn landscape, providing the audience with an acoustemological rendering of the neighborhood, even if they are not consciously aware of the cultural significance of the sounds. In addition, the clarinet was established as symbolic of Lev in his workshop, and an unstable theme was established for Ana’s Coffee that will become an important musical element for the emotional trajectory of the story. In the next section, I will explore Argue’s musical choices for the imagery in the “An Invitation” and “Missing Parts” episodes, which focus on depicting hands at work.
“An Invitation” and “Missing Parts:” Argue’s Realization of Žeželj’s Homage to Those Who Work with Their Hands

In chapter two, it was determined that Žeželj’s focus on the decline of craftspersons who work with their hands was a major influence on his creative process. Curiously, Argue never mentioned Žeželj’s views on these workers in my interviews with him. Whether Argue had an awareness of his collaborator’s outlook is unclear. One might say that Argue was more analytical in his interviews, while Žeželj’s emotions were clearer, but it is also possible that the personal sense of loss that Žeželj felt was not part of their collaborative process. Argue seems to view Brooklyn Babylon in the context of his experience in Brooklyn, where Žeželj draws on his larger world experience. This is understandable, given the artists’ different backgrounds.

Argue described his relationship with Žeželj only in artistic terms. He knew something of Danijel’s background, but that experience seems not to have been shared.

Of course, Danijel was deeply affected by the war in Yugoslavia. It’s not something that we ever talked about, but it is a shadow that is hanging over the piece and his personal story. He’s mixed Serbian and Croatian heritage, and it’s not something we ever discussed explicitly, and my read on it [is that] it’s extremely personal. It’s not something he brought up of his own volition and there is a reason for that.

One could conclude that this unsaid experience of Žeželj was left for Argue to interpret, and if Žeželj had been the composer, perhaps the music would have been darker. There is no indication, however, that Žeželj had anything but praise for Argue’s soundtrack, and he readily stated that the Brooklyn Babylon collaboration was perhaps his most significant work to date. But regardless of his knowledge of Žeželj’s views, Argue nevertheless embraced a complex compositional technique to emphasize the imagery of Lev’s hands at work, both in “The Invitation” and “Missing Parts,” and this complexity, in a way, reflected Argue’s own craftsmanship in creating the music for these episodes.
In “An Invitation,” Žeželj returns to Lev’s workshop to showcase the carousel maker’s hands in the act of creation. There are no less than nine images that come into focus featuring Lev’s hand at work in this episode. No power tools here, only hand tools, reflecting an intimacy with the craft. As the carousel horse takes shape, Žeželj’s imagery reflects fine, detailed work that only a master craftsperson could perform.

Argue returns to the clarinet to represent Lev’s hands at work, but this time a duet between two clarinets is used to create a canon that lies again within Steve Reich’s concept of process music. Argue explains his creative choice:

The canons in “An Invitation” and “Missing Parts” are inspired by Steve Reich’s process music, which audibly “shows the work” through a process of construction whereby motives are gradually assembled in a way that is clear to the listener. I was also influenced by Guillermo Klein’s use of hocketing canons in pieces like “La Ultima.”

Klein’s “hocketing canons” involve the displacement of the second subject entrance by an interval of time to create a space where each instrument can be heard individually. In “An Invitation,” the first clarinet begins the subject on beat one of the first measure, while the second clarinet begins its subject on beat two of measure five. This creates an alternating effect between the instruments that reflects the imagery of Lev’s two hands at work. This effect is clear to the audience in live performance, due to the distance between the performers. Argue gives the first clarinet to the Wind 3 part and the other to Wind 4, which in a Big Band configuration places them on either side of the section. As the trumpets pick up the canon, the distance between sections in the circular configuration on stage further enhances the ability of the audience to follow the development. Furthermore, Argue’s motivic statements extend and increase in complexity in each repetition, so that a process is developed (Ex. 3.10).
This music parallels the creative woodworking that we see Lev perform in the imagery. Although Žeželj doesn’t animate the back and forth motion of Lev’s hands, Argue’s creative canon creates a kind of sonic soundtrack for the woodwork. The audience doesn’t hear Lev’s hands chiseling the wood but, through the music, they can sense the sonic atmosphere in the shop.

Each of Žeželj’s images shows increasing detail in the carving of the carousel figure until the last frame, where the completed head of the horse is revealed. This increasing detail is reflected in the increasing complexity of the process music until the final frame, at which point the hocketing canon resolves in unison whole notes. Argue’s process music here works in a similar manner to the opening of “The Neighborhood,” where the music builds to an arrival point. After a brief return to the two hocketing clarinets of the opening, the imagery changes to a ringing doorbell, at which point listeners hear an ominous chorale reflecting the mail carrier’s arrival with an invitation from the Mayor.
Additional features of the music for this episode are worth noting. The hocketing canon is underlined with the Indie Rock feel now in the electric bass, contrabass clarinet, and tuba, and is joined later by a soli in the trombones that imitates the tenor sax melody in the first street scene of “The Neighborhood.” The use of these compositional devices accomplishes two goals. The first connects this movement with the music of the previous episode, and the second builds energy and tension for the increasing detail of Lev’s creative process, instilling anticipation for the finished carousel figure.

The hocketing canon makes its second appearance in the movement “Missing Parts,” as Žeželj again highlights Lev’s hands at work. Žeželj here builds his drawings with even more detail of the woodworking process, culminating with a final image of Lev’s hands alone. This could be interpreted as the exclamation point articulating Žeželj’s objective to make Brooklyn Babylon an “homage to people who work with their hands.” It also reflects the fact that Lev has resolved his moral dilemma over the Mayor’s commission and is working at the height of his artistry to create the figures that will adorn his special carousel for The Tower of Brooklyn.

Here, reflecting Lev’s determination and creativity, Argue develops his canon with even greater complexity, as it evolves through accordion; guitar; flutes; trumpets one, three and four; lead trombone; and percussive effects. This diverse orchestration parallels Lev’s outreach to other artisans in the episode to help him build his special carousel. A cajón, a wooden percussion instrument played seated with the hands, is highlighted both at the beginning and end of the episode. The remaining musicians play hand percussion that serves to reinforce the rhythm of the developing canon while adding a dry sound that adds punctuation to the canon’s elements. This hand percussion creates for the audience an additional visual and auditory layer of stimuli that reinforce the imagery’s significance.
The snapshot of the development of the hocketing canon can be seen in Ex. 3.11. The accordion began the movement with the first statement of canon and has progressed the farthest in the process. Trumpet 3 is the last to enter with the opening statement (canon 8) and the remaining parts can be seen moving through the canon in succession. The corresponding percussion parts are also noted.

The emphasis that Argue placed on hand movement in composing for this episode implies that he realized the importance of Žeželj’s outlook on manual craftsmanship, even if it was never expressed to him verbally. The performance’s overall effect creates yet another sounding of landscape, and, although this one was created for theatrical effect, in contrast to the dual meaning of Indie Rock for “The Neighborhood,” it nevertheless reinforces the cultural importance that Žeželj places on Lev’s craftsmanship, even if the full understanding of its loss to the artist lies beyond the reach of the composer and the audience. Argue again builds the complexity of this canon to a climactic landing point, the final frame showing just Lev’s hands (Fig 3.3), at which point the composer moves on to different thematic material to highlight the revealing of each of the four carousel figures created by Lev.

Fig 3.3. Final image accompanying the hocketing canon: Lev’s hands
Fig. 3.11. “Missing Parts” canon and process music with percussion emphasis
I will not go into greater detail in the analysis for the remainder of this episode, as I believe the musical development of the hocketing canon is the most relevant to this discussion. I will point out, however, that thematic material and eighth-note rhythmic figures from the street scenes of “The Neighborhood” return here, evidence of Argue’s intention that the episodes relate musically.

“The Tallest Tower in the World:” Argue’s Music for the Mayor’s Hall

As seen in chapter two, Žeželj’s views regarding authoritarian architecture were strong. He stressed that the buildings of the Soviet era were “out of proportion to the tiny people and were monuments to power.” His artwork for the Mayor’s building in “The Tallest Tower in the World” reflects that outlook, as Lev and Mara are dwarfed by the huge open space inside the structure and the large portraits on its wall, a notable contrast to the many small pictures in Ana’s Coffee (Fig 3.4).

Fig. 3.4. Pictures in the Mayor’s Hall in “The Tallest Tower in the World”
There was no indication in my conversations with Argue that Žeželj’s views on Soviet-style authoritarianism were a part of their shared creative process. Argue was unfamiliar with Tatlin’s Tower when asked about Žeželj’s influences for the Tower of Brooklyn, and never discussed the Mayor or his tower in authoritarian terms. So, again, Žeželj’s personal story was not a direct influence on the music Argue created here.

To reflect the gigantic scale of the building and its hallways, Argue chose to open the harmonic structure of his dramatic music using fifths and octaves in the lower voices and fourths for the mid voices. The third of the chord, establishing tonality, occurs only sporadically, again in open voicings. Trombones dominate the open texture, but it is enhanced by doublings in the tenor sax, fifth trumpet, and the rhythm section. The upper voices, trumpets 1, 2, and alto sax, are used for coloration, either minor seconds or major triads that suggest bitonality, giving an edge to the sound, possibly reinforcing the eerie nature of the imagery that includes gargoyles and massive gothic archways.

The rhythm and open chord structures occur in repetitive two-measure cells in a nine-beat pattern created by alternating 5/4 and 4/4 meters. This is another way that Argue reflects the massiveness of the environment. This sense of spatiality is reinforced by accents throughout, suggesting large reverberations of sound (Ex. 3.12). The odd meters also disrupt any sense that Lev and Mara are walking in a deliberate way through the hall, their pace being interrupted by the spectacle of the space around them. Jazz writing also comes into play as soprano sax and trumpet alternate improvised solos over the chord changes, the timbre of the instruments injects additional tension to the scene.
Ex. 3.12. Excerpt from “The Tallest Tower in the World” showing accents throughout
Argue resolves his *pesante* repetitive pulse through a fanfare in the trumpets that marks the arrival of the Mayor (Ex. 3.13).

![Ex. 3.13. Mayor’s fanfare](image)

In the remainder of the episode, Argue revisits material from “The Neighborhood.” The eighth-note process music of the introduction accompanies the Mayor’s slide show for his Tower of Brooklyn, while the turning flute figures from its concluding bars return in waltz time to highlight the image of the carousel he wants Lev to build (Ex. 3.14). 64 These musical devices again serve to tie “The Tallest Tower in the World” to music heard earlier by the audience.

![Ex. 3.14. The flute’s turning carousel figure](image)

**Ana’s Theme: Plot Trajectory and Nostalgia in Argue’s Score**

I now turn from Argue’s music for specific environments in *Brooklyn Babylon* to examine how his compositional process reinforces the overall plot of the story, specifically his handling of the theme for Ana’s Coffee Shop. The theme for Ana’s Coffee first served to

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64 Rob Wilkerson related that playing this difficult flute figure was unnerving at first, as it evoked laughter in the audience, confusing the musicians who could not see the tiny carousel in the imagery.
introduce us to Ana in “The Neighborhood,” and to the symbolism of her shop as a nostalgic touchstone for the work, connecting the community to the past. More importantly, this music also conveyed the emotional bond between Lev and Mara and Ana’s. The iterations of this theme will reflect how these bonds endure in the face of the upheaval the Mayor’s plans will bring into their lives.

The theme’s next appearance is in “Construction/Deconstruction,” when Mara convinces Lev to return with her to Ana’s Coffee, only to discover the shop’s broken sign atop a pile of rubble created by the Mayor’s demolition of the neighborhood. The theme returns briefly a third time in “Builders,” when Lev awakens from a nightmare about losing Mara to the destruction as well. The theme’s last iterations come in “Coney Island,” when the carousel, with the help from displaced residents of the neighborhood, is transformed into the new Ana’s Coffee.

These appearances of the theme correspond to the trajectory of the story: Lev and Mara form an emotional attachment to Ana and her shop; then the shop is lost; there is fear of more loss (Mara); Lev works to insure the shop’s return, albeit in a different form. This story is an allegory of the lives of displaced people. Facing loss and hardship, they migrate from their homeland, bringing what they can of their culture with them to form new communities. *Brooklyn Babylon*’s story is doubly tragic as people once displaced become displaced again. Lev Bezdomni’s symbolic name, “without a home,” is again significant here, as it implies a pattern of recurring dislocation. But perhaps the story is also symbolic of Žeželj’s own experience in Yugoslavia. The country he grew up in becomes torn apart by war and ethnic cleansing. The result is a fragile peace between separate nation states, but the breakup came at steep economic, social, and for many, personal cost. The story might also be interpreted as representative of
African-Americans, migrating north in the twentieth century only to face gentrification in the twenty-first.

This plot line of found-lost-found is a common one in storytelling. It also calls to mind Tannock’s theory of nostalgia, where the separation from an idealized past creates yearning for that past, instigating a quest to reclaim it. Musical material can be reimagined and reworked for each step in this process. Nineteenth-century opera composer Puccini famously coined a term, “logical return,” to explain the intentional process composers use to accentuate such plot lines.

A recollection of music heard in previous acts, refashioned and reconfigured to suit new dramatic situations … the recollections … are fragmentary, combining short snippets of melodies from previous acts. The dramatic (final) episode features more sustained instances of the musical recollections.65

The found-lost-found trajectory described above resonates with how I see Argue’s creative process at work for Ana’s theme. Argue presents the theme in full in “The Neighborhood,” in fragmentary form in the dramatic interior scenes, and in enhanced form in the shop’s triumphant return in “Coney Island.” The audience recognizes the connection between this thematic material and Ana’s Coffee and through it becomes emotionally engaged with the plot. Absent the music, the audience would probably follow the plot through Žeželj’s imagery alone, but Argue evokes a unified emotional response in the audience that serves the theatrical goal of the production as a collective experience. As with all music, the degree and type of emotional response in individual audience members is difficult to know, but, in conjunction with the imagery, the central significance of Ana’s Coffee to the story is reinforced through Argue’s recurring thematic material.

65 Kunio Hara, “The Structure of Nostalgia in Puccin’s Operas,” 206-207.
In the following score excerpts, Argue’s different iterations of the theme are shown. The original theme for Ana’s Coffee can be seen in Ex. 3.9. In Ex 3.15, the melody returns, but in thickened orchestration. Trumpets, two muted in the original, are now four flugelhorns, giving a horn-like quality to the theme; when the clarinets join in, their previous pyramid role is transferred to the rhythm section. The pyramids remain in the fifteen eighth-notes shared by the original, but only in the piano with a syncopated pattern emerging. This condensing of thematic elements could reflect the fact that Mara is imagining her return to Ana’s Coffee, but the full experience of being there is yet to be realized.
In “Builders,” the music is simplified even more. The theme’s accompanying pyramids, reduced to only two fundamental notes, are supplanted by syncopation in the piano, now arranged in an $8 + 7$ pattern of 15 eighth notes. The solo clarinet that Argue scores for Lev’s dream sequence overlaps the initiation of the accompaniment, foreshadowing music at the end of the work. The melody itself is relegated to the flutes and begins as Lev awakens from his nightmare about losing Mara, only to find her sleeping peacefully next to her drawing, which will inspire Lev’s carousel (Fig. 3.5). The whole truncated effect conveys further distance from
the original Ana’s theme as Lev struggles with the consequences of accepting the Mayor’s commission (Ex. 3.16).

Fig. 3.5. Mara and her drawing
Theme Flutes Only

Simple harmony

First 2 notes of pyramid

Pyramid transformed to pulsating eighths 8+7 15-note pattern

Ex. 3.16 Ana’s Coffee theme in “Builders”
The appearance of the theme in “Coney Island” is the most complex. The enhanced instrumentation of the melody features flutes, upper clarinets, and trumpets. The harmony is thickened with five voices in the trumpets. The pyramids, orchestrated stronger with syncopation in the trombones, suggest stronger emotions. The piano doubles the trombones while the bass and bass clarinet play the fundamentals of the pyramids. Percussion reinforce the building of the pyramids. The electric guitar, formerly part of the accompaniment, is now given the role of soloist, as Argue indicates to the guitarist that a lyrical style is to be pursued. The purpose of this more triumphant version of the theme is to underline the tale’s victorious quality, as Lev has seemingly outwitted the Mayor by completing the carousel on his own terms and preserved Ana’s Coffee as an important institution—not just for himself and Mara, but for the neighborhood, as well (Ex. 3.17). This variation also features the full-length melody of the original from “The Neighborhood” and ends in similar fashion, with truncated pyramids under extended whole notes. The final chord, however, is more dissonant than in the first version, foretelling the change of mood, as the visual narrative shifts from the new Ana’s Coffee to Lev sitting alone on the beach.
Ex. 3.17. Enhanced version of Ana’s Coffee theme in “Coney Island”
Hara, in her analysis of nostalgia in Puccini’s *La Bohème*, outlined the plot of the opera in four stages: the initial meeting of the lovers; their separation; their reunion; and the impossibility of recovery. She stated that, while the third stage, reunion, is the hopeful, full-of-possibility dimension of nostalgia, the last stage is its despair and quiet resignation. Although American popular culture often removes this fourth stage in its plot lines, ensuring a “happy ending,” Žeželj has opted to include this final stage in *Brooklyn Babylon*. For Žeželj, the work is a cautionary tale, a forewarning that when some things are lost, they are never coming back. This is epitomized in Lev’s blank stare across the ocean in the scene following the reunion, and Žeželj painting over his mural in black to conclude the work.

If the return of Ana’s theme in enhanced form is representative of the “full-of-possibility side of nostalgia,” then what follows in Argue’s creative process can be interpreted as music for the nostalgia of despair. Argue strips the theme of its melody and orchestration, leaving only Lev’s symbolic solo clarinet fading into the pulsating piano, the collapsed version of the 15 note pyramid that represented hope for a new beginning. I believe that this section can be interpreted as Argue’s final iteration of the theme, which is now a skeleton of the original (Ex. 3.18).

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We have seen in this section how Argue’s treatment of the music for Ana’s Coffee advances the storyline by giving the audience a sonic point of reference for the journey of the shop in the story. That this journey is an allegory for the experience of displaced persons may be a subtext that the audience does not realize. Žeželj’s tale parallels Hara’s four stages of narrative plot, while Argue reinforces them through a “logical return” of thematic elements, similar to Puccini’s techniques in *La Boheme*. The meeting is the full theme, the separation features truncated versions, the reunion is an enhanced version of the original, and the despair strips the theme bare. The theme itself is notable for its unbalanced character. Meandering through a variety of meters, it never restarts in the same place, perhaps a metaphor for the elusiveness of repeating time that is nostalgia.
Argue’s musical choice for the ending sequence of *Brooklyn Babylon* is a return to the minimalist music of “The Neighborhood.” The combined eighth-note rhythmic patterns crescendo to a dissonant *ff* chord that adds tuba and contrabass clarinet to create an ominous orchestration. This serves as both the punctuation to Žeželj’s final image, which reveals the Mayor’s tower looming over the Coney Island scene, and a connection to music from the beginning of the work (Fig. 3.6, Ex. 3.19).

![Fig 3.6. Brooklyn Babylon final image](image-url)
Ex. 3.19. “Coney Island” ending music

Combined minimalist figures of “The Neighborhood”
The “Prologue” and the Interludes: Argue’s Stand-Alone Music

While much of this work resulted from collaboration between Argue and Žeželj, there are moments when the composer’s music is unaccompanied by the artist’s imagery. These are the “Prologue,” the Interludes, and the “Epilogue.” In this section, I will focus on the first two, as they are most relevant to my analysis.

The “Prologue” serves two purposes in the production: it is a musical introduction to the work, and a theatrical vehicle for placing the musicians on stage—or, as Argue put it, “to assemble a big band before your eyes.” Essentially, the various sections of the ensemble move on stage when it is their time to play the introduction’s theme, which is based on the carousel music from the “Grand Opening” episode. The trombone section appears on the apron of the stage and plays an introductory chorale. Then, the drummer, playing a *tapan*, a type of Balkan bass drum, begins a march beat that serves to commence the assembly process. The trombones and *tapan* march across the stage and take their positions. The musicians are arranged in a circle, quite different from the block grouping of the standard big band. The trumpets in turn arrive from backstage. The wind section processes from the audience in their turn, and finally the rhythm section appears playing portable instruments: the piano playing melodica, the bassist playing a woodblock, and the guitarist playing acoustic guitar. In this way Argue states that the Prologue served to “assemble the ensembles from different street bands.”

A notable feature is that the musicians are in costumes, with each section having an identity. The trombone section is in overalls, symbolizing the working class. The saxes are in 1920s suit attire, similar to what was popular among the hipsters. Argue was not specific regarding the other sections, other than to say that they represented different types of street
musicians one might see in Brooklyn, and his point was that the ensemble was to be created from street musicians.

Once all are on stage, the music moves into an improvisatory section with various musicians soloing. A climactic section, similar to the shout chorus in “The Neighborhood,” follows, with the entire ensemble playing the theme, accompaniment, or counterlines. The music fades into the turning flute figures that represent the carousel when it appears in “The Tallest Tower in the World.”

The “Prologue”

For Argue, the “Prologue” was to be the introduction to the work, but he did not want it to be an overture per se; instead, the movement would serve to preview musical elements rather than state them explicitly. His thoughts:

In the “Prologue,” I wanted to, not in an opera overture way, seed all the thematic material that would later be transformed in the piece, and to seed it in a way that made it a satisfying piece of music in its own right—a concise and compelling and memorable piece of music that would have the DNA of everything else I was going to do later in the work.

Argue’s first composed element for Brooklyn Babylon was the carousel theme. The original version appears in “Grand Opening,” when Lev’s carousel is revealed at the top of the tower. The theme was important as a nostalgic reference to a common American sonic landscape: the sounds of amusement parks, county fairs, and their depiction in film. Argue explains:

And this is the moment in “Grand Opening” where everything drops out. It’s [a] piccolo in an octave and a fifth above [a] straight mute trumpet being harmonized in a bucket in Trumpet 3, and there’s the ba-da dot accompaniment theme in muted trumpets and in clarinet. And this is meant to sound like an old fairground calliope. This treatment of the theme is closest to what I originally wrote (Ex. 3.20).
As this theme was fundamental to the work, Argue chose to make it prominent in the “Prologue.” It appears first in the trombones (Ex. 3.21).

It also appears as the “A” section in an AABA form, with the trumpet and rhythm sections rounding out the appearances of “A.” The saxophones have the “B” section in the form, newly-
composed material not in the original theme, and it features a solo in the soprano sax with the remaining saxophones in accompaniment (Ex. 3.22).

Another important feature of the “Prologue” is the bass line movement. Argue spoke of his “pre-compositional work—taking the ideas that you are going to be exploring and looking at them from many different angles.” This preliminary work included the development of a pitch set on which he based root moments of the themes here and in other episodes of the work. Drawing on the legacy of early twentieth-century serialism, the pitch set that Argue chose is 02378, which in the “Prologue” corresponds to pitches A, B, C, E and F, the numbers relating to the number of half steps each pitch is from A. Argue did not use the pitch set purely to obscure tonality, however, as he used some root movement such as B to E, to create dominant to tonic root relationships. This technique is closer to Alban Berg’s approach to serialism.67

Let’s see how this plays out in the bass line to the carousel theme in the “Prologue” (see the excerpt in Ex. 3.23). I have placed the pitch set number of each note on beat one of the measures. The notes on other beats are considered passing tones. The F# in the last two

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measures indicates a deviation from the pitch set, as here Argue uses a supertonic-dominant (ii-V) relationship in the key of E minor.

The same pitch set can also be seen in “The Neighborhood” in the root movements underlying the tenor sax solo. The root pitches are A♭, E, E♭, A, E, D♭, and E♭, which fall into the transposed pitch set of D♭, E♭, E, A♭, and A. Here, again, Argue utilized relationships within the set to create a subdominant-dominant-tonic relationship, as the last two pitches are IV-V in A♭.

In “Coney Island” the root movements are further transformed. Argue explains his creative process from the pre-compositional work.

So this is something related to the pre-compositional work. The [carousel] theme at “Coney Island,” in clarinet and euphonium, is the retrograde of [the original theme]. It is re-rhythmicized so notes that last one bar there may last four bars here. The bass motion is inverted, so the whole bass motion is the inversion of the chord structure [in “Prologue”]. The [“Prologue”] chord progression becomes the source of a lot of things; it becomes the source of “The Neighborhood,” and it’s used throughout the piece.

The retrograde process creates a slow, tranquil version of the theme that works well with the imagery of the carousel being carried by a balloon and landing gently on the sands of Coney Island. The contrabass part is written in treble clef to accommodate the high pitches and harmonics, adding to the airiness of this variation.
While the root movements derived from the pitch set create unusual chord relationships, the harmonic structures over these roots remain largely tonal. Looking again at the first occurrence of the theme in “Prologue” in the trombones, I have indicated the triad-based harmonies over the pitch set members (Ex. 3.24).

Similarly, for the tenor sax solo in “The Neighborhood,” the chords Argue built over the pitch set are not atonal: $A_{\flat}\text{Maj}$, $E\text{Maj}$, $E_{\flat}\text{7sus}$, $A\text{Maj7}(\#11)$, E13sus, C#min9, and $E_{\flat}\text{min7}(\#6)$ are all chord symbols utilized in jazz harmony.

I believe Argue’s goal here was to instill a modern feel or edge to his music by inserting a certain amount of tension without replacing diatonic harmony altogether. Music of a more dissonant nature might have detracted from the time reference of the work, and diminished the impact of its nostalgic references. _Brooklyn Babylon_ is an extension of Argue’s experimentation with twentieth-century compositional techniques, as shown in his development of the process music in “The Neighborhood” from his earlier work, _Habeas Corpus_. His interest in serial music would continue in a later work, _Real Enemies_, based entirely on 12-tone rows.
Finally, the most important characteristic of Argue’s handling of the carousel theme in “Prologue” lies in his integration of Balkan music elements into the score. Argue describes his choice for the theme:

The [carousel] was the first theme [I wrote], and I quickly got the idea that I didn’t actually want to open with the [original] theme. That felt too on the nose, too obvious. I wanted there to be more energy. I also knew my co-creator Žeželj was Croatian, born of Serbian parents, and so there is a lot of music from the Balkans in *Brooklyn Babylon*.

Argue studied the music of Croatia extensively, seeking material he could use in the work, but found much traditional Croatian music to be “about guitar and stringed instruments and microtonal voice,” styles that could not be easily adapted to big band. Another style, however, could be utilized:

... but just next door there is a whole other tradition of brass band music in Serbia, which is a lot easier to adapt. And although that music exists in Croatia—there are [Romani] brass bands that travel all through Croatia—it’s not a native Croatian style. But it’s so close that it’s familiar to a lot of people throughout the region.

Argue, therefore, sought out a local Serbian brass band, Slavic Soul Party, that performs every Tuesday at a Brooklyn nightclub called B.A.R.B.E.S, studying the style and talking with members of the band. The instrumentation for this group includes Saxophone, Trumpet, Trombone, Snare Drum, and *tapan*, orchestration that could more easily be translated into a big band idiom. After his study, Argue had an idea for “Prologue.”

Eventually what came of that was, “What if a Balkan brass band was playing that carousel theme that I wrote? What would that sound like?” It’s in 3/4, and Balkan [brass band] music is not [usually] in 3/4 so already it’s different. It’s a waltz, but kind of adapted to that Balkan style.

Argue gave his band sound recordings of this style to listen to, early on. As his drummer knew little about the *tapan*, Argue researched the instrument, learning about finding the right
kind of branch from a tree to use as a brush on the opposite side from the beater. A trumpet player from the group was consulted regarding the fingerings of characteristic trills.

Rob Wilkerson praised Argue’s authenticity in how he brought the style into Brooklyn Babylon, and how the musicians approached the music. He related that they knew they were not a Balkan band, but could be respectful of the music by integrating what they learned into the performance. This contrasts with simply imitating the style superficially, he said.

Another element of Balkan music Argue noted was the prevalence of uneven phrase lengths in the music. The ending of a phrase could be in a meter different than the others and he integrated this into the phrase endings in “Prologue.” This also became the basis of the fifteen eighth-note elements in the accompaniment for Ana’s Coffee, as was discussed earlier in this chapter (see the 3/4, 7/8 bars ending the phrase in Ex. 3.25).

Ex. 3.25. Balkan-style figures and uneven phrase lengths in “Prologue”
The full effect of the “Prologue” is a rousing opening to the work that draws the audience in both sonically and visually and leaves them anticipating what is going to appear on the big white projection screen behind the band. The music is celebratory, conveying a moment of excitement. If Argue had opened the work with the original carousel theme, it would have evoked a much different mood, perhaps nostalgic, while the traditional overture would have provided an interesting, but perhaps overwhelming, stimulus to open the production.

In my mind, if there is a critique of the “Prologue,” it would be that it seems far removed from the nostalgia and loss that follow. The audience might not expect the ending of the work, especially Žeželj’s eradication of his mural with black paint, to be so bleak. While this conclusion evoked the sense of loss in the audience that the artist hoped for, it may also have been somewhat confusing to them, as they were not prepared for it musically from the outset. But perhaps this disconnect from the rousing Prologue was intentional.

Argue winds down his high-energy Balkan music at the end of the “Prologue” in a manner not unlike a carousel slowing at the end of its cycle. However, there is little sense of ambivalence here, just the satisfaction of a fun ride coming to an end. One might conclude that, as this was the first movement that he composed, Argue was yet to be influenced by Žeželj’s darker imagery or the “shadow” of his collaborator’s personal experience in the Balkans. Regardless, the “Prologue” is successful in “seeding” much of the music that follows, making it a cohesive introduction to the composition. In the final section of this chapter, I look at the Interludes, music composed by Argue to occur between the episodes of Žeželj’s story.
The Interludes: Argue Sounding the Landscape of Brooklyn

In “The Neighborhood,” Argue’s use of Indie Rock was central to his creative process for the street fair. As discussed earlier, he called the music a cultural signifier of Brooklyn at the time, and I theorized that the use of this music created an acoustemology of the Brooklyn landscape. I also noted how the use of the tenor sax as the solo instrument for the street scenes was an iconic image in the borough, and that Žeželj included an image of street musicians in the sequence for the fair. To continue this “sounding” of Brooklyn, Argue created the interludes to be performed between the episodes.

The interludes do not serve to link the episodes musically, but are rather a kind of musical walking tour of Brooklyn. Argue designed each interlude to represent a type of ensemble one might encounter on the streets of the borough. There are two wooden flutes in “Enjoin,” an acoustic bass and melodica in “Enthrall,” a solo jazz trumpet in “Bewail,” a solo guitar in “Unmoored,” and a pair of interludes based on the Balkan brass band style in “Infuse” and “Arise.” Argue did not relate why he chose to include the interludes, but I surmise it was part of his concept to highlight that the big band on stage was an assembly of street musicians. Each section of the big band is represented in the collection.

“Infuse” and “Arise”

I will first focus on “Infuse” and “Arise” as, taken together with the Balkan brass band style in “Prologue,” they represent both a world and Brooklyn cultural phenomenon related to Serbian music. As ethnomusicologist Alex Markovic has written, this music became very popular in the early 2000s, as young western Europeans were drawn to its high energy and
exoticism. At the same time, a sense of Yugonost, or nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia, was sweeping countries like Serbia and this music became popular as an expression of emotional attachment to the historical and cultural memory of a time when Yugoslavia was one country. I had the privilege of seeing this cultural phenomenon first hand while attending a standard Tuesday night appearance of Slavic Soul Party at B.A.R.B.E.S in June 2018 in Brooklyn’s Park Slope neighborhood.

On arrival, I was directed to the back room of the club, set aside as a performance space for musical groups. The musicians arrived—an alto sax, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, and snare drum—and started taking notes about the pieces to be played from the director, who had a *tapan* strapped on his front like a bass drummer in a marching band. In his right hand he held a standard felt beater, and in the left a small tree branch with tendrils that created a whooshing sound when brushed across the head of the drum. A small cymbal was also attached to the top of the drum. The music, slow at first, drew a small audience to the sound. Two men who had been seated began a traditional dance as the music slowly accelerated, and the onlookers started clapping their hands to the beat in approval. As the music accelerated, more people moved into the room. As the music reached its height of dynamic intensity, the room was jammed; people were jumping up and down with hands high in the air. It was a display of complete freedom of movement and joy.

Many audience members seemed to be from the local Slavic community, judging from their language and knowledge of where the music was heading in advance. Others seemed like

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locals joining in on the fun. The music was cacophonous as the brass played at full volume, tiring themselves after twenty minutes of scorching music and needing a break. The energy in the room was palpable, as the audience seemed to draw on the power of the ensemble and the dancing around them.

Argue’s choice of this musical style was another clear attempt at “sounding” a Brooklyn landscape. That this musical ritual repeats every Tuesday night throughout the year speaks to the longevity of this cultural institution. B.A.R.B.E.S is an acoustemological space where people from the Balkans come to partake in a ritual celebrating their culture. Similarly, both “Infuse”, featuring the trombones, and “Arise,” comprising the entire big band also capture this experience for the audience.

In Ex.3.26, the score to “Arise,” we see elements of this style. All instruments are given the score. The rhythmic groove is based on an alternation of 7/8 and 6/8 meters. It is high energy throughout with no variation of dynamics. The articulation emphasizes staccato. A driving bass line is given for lower instruments, while background figures are indicated for band members to play at will. Various instruments can choose what role to play and when to come in and out. Chord changes are given for soloists. Soloists typically play in an embellished style with trills and ornamentation throughout. There is no set duration for the interlude; the band members decide on the length. Although not indicated here, the tapan plays a beat based on the lower system with the right-hand beater on bass notes, the left stick on figures.
“Enthrall” and “Bewail”

The interludes “Enthrall” and “Bewail,” though contributing to music one might hear on a Brooklyn street, contain fewer specific cultural references. Argue stated that “Enthrall,” an improvised duet between melodica and acoustic bass, imitated the music one might hear coming from a restaurant. He had no description for “Bewail,” but it was performed on a CD recording of the production as an improvised jazz trumpet solo over a slow plateau modal background provided by the remaining brass players, with no rhythm section accompaniment. This was music possibly heard on the street as coming from a jazz club.
“Enjoin,” consisting of a duet between two solo wooden flutes, also had no specific cultural reference, but I include here a portion of my interview with Rob Wilkerson about the interactive creative process for this interlude:

Author: It’s this urban thing, the sounding of the landscape. He [Argue] said that the interludes were little groups imitating street musicians.

Rob: The flute duet [Enjoin], definitely became that. Erica [Erica von Kleist, Wind 1 player] had this bag of flutes, and she said, “Yeah, I always wanted [Enjoin] to be on these ... to be more like [what a] street musician might use.” The trick for me is playing consistency, but if you check it out on the recording it’s nowhere near [the printed parts]. It’s the shape, but it is nowhere near those pitches, because we couldn’t get those pitches on the two flutes.

Author: So what kind of flutes were you using?

Rob: Where they came from I’m not sure. Erica had a bag of flutes from all over, probably some South American, some Asian. They were both wooden flutes.

Author: They were transverse?

Rob: I don’t really know what flutes we used, but we did it really well. It sounded really good, but so it’s not something we can really replicate [in live performance].

Author: It’s a gorgeous sound.

Rob: Yeah, I prefer it [on the wooden flutes], it’s great. But that flute was like really difficult to play; the embouchure spot was like, I couldn’t move once I found it. That’s the kind of thing that would be a nightmare after playing a bunch of saxophones, and have it to be something that would be consistently there. I don’t know, maybe it would be worth the trouble, even if Darcy preferred it. But we don’t have enough time to get set to play a weird instrument—but in a recording studio it’s fine.

Author: Yeah, you can do it as many times as you need to.

Rob: I think we only did it two or three times, and Darcy [Argue] was like, “OK, that’s cool.” But that was fun.

Whether Argue had a specific source for this interlude or was just being imitative of something he heard was never specified, but as seen here, the creative process for these
interludes was often a collaborative effort on part of the ensemble. For Argue, this process for the interludes was important. He wanted them to sound spontaneous, and he was satisfied with whatever the ensemble produced both in performance and in the studio recording.

“Unmoored”

Interestingly, although Argue intensely studied music from the Balkans to include in *Brooklyn Babylon*, both to bring energy to the work and give homage to his collaborator’s homeland, Žeželj, for his part, although approving of Argue’s efforts, nevertheless was not a fan of Croatian ethnic music. His thoughts:

Darcy was interested in using something from the Balkans or from Croatia or Serbia and they are all different styles because just within Croatia, in different regions, there are very different styles of music. I think a lot of it to me personally is not very interesting; you know, it’s a folk music. But it’s probably, if you are studying it, might be interesting, but to listen to it, I don’t know.

That being said, the last Interlude, “Unmoored,” based on a folk song from the Medjimurje region of Croatia, did have a nostalgic effect on the artist.

But there is this one region where there is something really kind of cool happening in the music because there are different influences from Russian music and some Hungarian music and there is some Gypsy [Romani]. I would mention that [this] area is called Medjimurje, and so I just pointed toward that style and I think that is exactly what he used for one of the pieces. That music has something very sad and nostalgic in it, and it’s really beautiful. DJA interpreted in his own special way.

“Unmoored” is scored for solo acoustic guitar. It features an embellished style and asymmetrical meters commonly found in eastern European music. Although Argue found most Croatian folk music unadaptable to Big Band, he nevertheless found some songs suitable for an interlude. *Unmoored* was the result, a re-harmonization of the folk song “Cveti mi fijolica” (My violet is blooming) from the Medjimurje region Žeželj spoke of (Ex. 3.27).
The Interludes, like the Balkan brass band music in “Prologue” and the rock-influenced street music in “The Neighborhood,” were all part of Argue’s intention to create sonic landscapes for the audience. Although the full cultural understanding of this music was not...
possible to convey, the audience nevertheless was treated to a real sense of how the Brooklyn music scene sounds. That both the composer and the musicians themselves sought to be respectful of the Balkan music added to the genuineness of their performance. The improvisatory efforts of the musicians, as members of the Brooklyn community themselves, added to this realism through their own personal experience within this musical landscape.

Summary

We have seen in this chapter how Argue worked collaboratively with Žeželj in creating the music for *Brooklyn Babylon*. The music evolved in conjunction with the media artist’s creative process, rather than as a separate soundtrack after the fact. Argue worked not just to reflect the moods for Žeželj’s visual environments, but to sound them as well, tapping into how Brooklyn residents experienced their world through sound during the time *Brooklyn Babylon* was composed. These soundscapes reflect the nostalgic influences on Žeželj’s creative process, even if a thorough understanding of those influences was never fully shared with the composer. Argue also worked diligently to weave elements of his creative process together to form cohesiveness in the work through repeated themes, compositional devices, and pre-compositional planning. And finally, his handling of the music for Ana’s Coffee provides the audience with the possibility of an emotional connection to the characters, while advancing the plot as an allegory for displaced immigrants everywhere.
Conclusion

Akin to Kinderman’s analogy of an iceberg, this research was based on my belief that there was much below the surface of *Brooklyn Babylon*, and that the undertaking of both a musical and extramusical analysis, inspired by the genetic criticism model, would lead to a greater understanding of the creative process for the work. In evaluating the success of this approach, two questions should be asked: Was the extramusical investigation helpful in further understanding the artists’ intent behind *Brooklyn Babylon*, and was the theoretical analysis effective in allowing me to “hear more in the music?”

The primary source material of the interviews was an invaluable resource in understanding the artists’ creative process. While both shared a vision of an idealized “Brooklyn of the Imagination,” it was clear that Žeželj brought a more profound view of loss to the work than Argue’s observations of gentrification. Žeželj’s emotional vigor in our interviews was in stark contrast to Argue’s cool analytical dialogue.

Žeželj’s views on the decline of work done with the hands explains why the basis of the story centered on the craft of carousel-making, and why there was an abundance of imagery showing Lev’s hands at work in his shop. Lev’s views on authoritarian architecture gave perspective to his design for the tower and his characterization of the Mayor. His basing of the character Ana on his mother highlighted a personal connection to the work, while unpacking the definition of Lev Bezdomni’s name revealed the fundamental concept on which the story was built.

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70 Ibid., 12.
The fact that Žeželj’s background was never shared between the artists is important.

Argue described Žeželj’s personal story as “an unspoken shadow that hung over the piece.” While I uncovered some of the gaps in Argue’s understanding of Žeželj’s influences in approaching *Brooklyn Babylon*, I nevertheless concluded that Žeželj’s imagery was sufficient for Argue to deduce the motivations of his collaborator, and in fact, these gaps proved little hindrance in producing a successful work.

My second interview with Argue provided an understanding of how, for him, *Brooklyn Babylon* was not a nostalgic tale, but a “critique of nostalgia.” Without this knowledge, the research might have been built on false assumptions, and the connection between Argue’s view of the Hipsters and the character of the Mayor would have been left undiscovered. Absent his and saxophonist Rob Wilkerson’s comments on Indie Rock, the cultural significance of this music, and its understanding by Argue’s musicians, would have stayed unknown.

I believe the application of social theories and ethnomusicological research into investigating extramusical concepts in the work was similarly revealing. Davies’s theories on nostalgia in the creative process showed that Žeželj worked under a nostalgic outlook, while Argue sought to create nostalgia. Tannock’s theories were helpful in evaluating the Hipsters’ strange relationship to nostalgia and in showing how restorative nostalgia could be helpful in rebuilding identity in a displaced community. Parallels with compositional devices of the past, such as Baidassarre’s discussion of Bruckner’s use of instruments to convey nostalgia (*Topai*), and Hara’s analysis of Puccini’s compositional concept of logical return, were effective in analyzing why Argue’s compositional choices were effective. Stefaniija’s analysis proved helpful in determining that Argue’s use of older musical styles did not constitute an instance of nostalgia.
Considering landscape, I return to my larger investigation comparing *Brooklyn Babylon*, an urban fable, to Schneider’s *The Thompson Fields*, a rural reminiscence. How does Argue go about creating music that expresses an urban landscape? Here, Feld’s concept of acoustemology comes into play. Argue understands his world principally through sound. In hearing street musicians, going to music clubs, listening to contemporary radio, and surrounding himself with fellow artists, he is immersed in a creative scene that conveys an aural knowledge of the urban culture around him. This knowledge is expanded by the sounds of living in the city, so when he sees Žeželj’s images of a street fair, he can construct a musical idea drawing on his listening experience with the annual Atlantic Antic. In formulating music to “sound” Lev’s hands at work in “Missing Parts,” he can reach for a hocketed canon he heard in a small music club. When reaching for a musical style to represent his collaborator Žeželj’s heritage, he has the local band Slavic Soul Party to call upon for a further understanding of the Balkan Brass Band style. Creating the music for *Brooklyn Babylon*, even the existence of the work itself, would not have been possible without Argue’s aural knowledge of the culture around him. The audience may be watching a fictional Brooklyn, but they are gaining an acoustic knowledge of the real one.

Do I hear more in the music of *Brooklyn Babylon* now than when I started this research? Has the study proved successful in this regard? The answer is certainly yes, but I found this ability came as much from knowledge gleaned in my interviews with the artist as from the musical analysis of the score. Argue’s first interview was important in guiding me through his early approaches to the work. Learning of his pre-compositional approach to a pitch set was fundamental to appreciating his efforts to make the work interconnected. Understanding how his carousel theme, his first compositional idea, was transformed through the Balkan Brass Band style, and why he chose this Serbian music, makes sense of the “Prologue.” The haunting music
in “Coney Island” is now better appreciated as the diminutive inversion of this theme. His observation of odd phrase endings in Balkan music explains the 15 eighth-note groupings in Ana’s music. Wilkerson’s comments allowed me to see how minimalism was at work in Argue’s creative output. It is doubtful that this deeper understanding of Argue’s compositional process would have been uncovered through theoretical analysis alone.

Musical analysis of the final score enhanced the listening of Argue’s music in other ways, however. Examination of the open harmonic structures in “The Tallest Building in the World” revealed why this music was effective in “sounding” the Mayor’s Hall. Tracing the process music in “The Neighborhood” and “Missing Parts” showed how this music could build tension to a keyframe in the imagery. An investigation of Argue’s orchestration highlighted its value in creating the mood in Lev’s shop and Ana’s Coffee. The use of odd meters in Ana’s theme was essential in creating a sense of timelessness in the work, underlining the artists’ intent of placing *Brooklyn Babylon* adrift in time. Argue’s pyramids in groups of 15 gave the theme a breathless quality, enhancing its emotional impact. Both this theme and circular nature of his 3/4-time carousel theme could be interpreted as encapsulating nostalgia itself.

The results of this study reinforce my belief that a comprehensive approach to analyzing *Brooklyn Babylon* was a worthwhile undertaking. While theoretical analysis is rewarding, it can stand only as a skeleton of a greater understanding of any work. Slaughter’s excellent analysis of form in “The Neighborhood” is impressive, but leaves out an investigation of the symbolism in the work.\(^{71}\) My analysis includes an examination of the the multi-layered compositional complexity of Ana’s theme, but also addresses its importance in relation to the emotional

\(^{71}\) Slaughter, Jason. “Contemporary Big Band Music.” Order No. 10753141, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey - New Brunswick, 2017, 140.
connection between Lev, Mara, and Ana. While Slaughter’s approach may be helpful in assisting the jazz big band director in preparing to conduct the episode, this deeper level of understanding could prove helpful to the ensemble in performing it, to the audience in appreciating it, and to the musicologist in studying it.

**Brooklyn Babylon as Social Commentary**

Beyond this research, however, considering how the work can both be representative of, and a social commentary on relevant events of our time should not be ignored. Immigrants forced to leave their homes, attempts to rebuild an idealized past, the dangers inherent in authoritarian leaders, and the hijacking of nostalgic and patriotic symbols for personal gain are all issues raised in *Brooklyn Babylon* in 2011. Fast forward to 2021 and, in the USA, immigrant populations have increased, authoritarian tendencies are on the rise, nostalgia and patriotic symbols have been hijacked for a populist agenda, and populations with money are displacing long-time residents, driving housing crises.

That *Brooklyn Babylon* is finally a work of social commentary speaks to Argue’s and Žeželj’s shared view that their role as artists is to create works that highlight what they see as injustice in the world around them. Placing the work in indefinite time reveals their desire to make *Brooklyn Babylon* a universal story, rather than just a specific narrative.

The impact of Žeželj’s theatrical device at the end of the performance cannot be overstated. As Žeželj erased his mural, I sensed that the mood in some audience members transformed from joy with the supposed happy ending, to confusion. They didn’t expect the artist chose to destroy his own work. This muted the applause at the end of the performance. I’m sure if Žeželj had let the mural remain, some in the audience would have lingered to admire
it. If the artist had decided to sell his mural, there would have been eager buyers. As stated in chapter two, I believe the artist’s intent was to instill a sense of loss in the audience, some small parallel to the experience of the characters in the story. That the audience seemed more confused than sad speaks to a continued disconnect between the experience of so many people in the world and our own. Still, it was a significant act on Žeželj’s part for making this multimedia work more impactful, and driving home his point that when some things are gone, they are never coming back.

Žeželj’s anti-nostalgic view parallels Argue’s statement that *Brooklyn Babylon* is not a nostalgic story, but a critique of nostalgia. Despite his lament for the decline of hand crafts, the mural’s erasure suggests that Žeželj does not view the past as something that can be retrieved. Once one loses their home, their livelihood, their community, their culture, or their country, there is no replacement. We do not know Žeželj’s experience with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, but we can presume that he witnessed loss on a massive scale, and deduce from the ending of *Brooklyn Babylon* that he has little patience for those who believe that rebuilding the past can mitigate loss.

The conclusions of this research, however, do not fully explain the emotional impact of the performance for me personally. As with all music, an individual response is subjective, but I was particularly struck with Argue’s music for the street scenes in “The Neighborhood.” He seemed to capture the vibrancy and energy of Brooklyn in a particularly powerful way, as only someone acutely in tune with that experience could. The intimate music for Lev in his workshop, reflected in the solo clarinet, the airy wistfulness of Ana’s theme in flutes and fluegelhorns, and the power of the brass and processed trumpet solo in “Builders” (an episode not discussed in this paper) in depicting the human toil in constructing the tower, all show
Argue’s affinity for effective orchestration. Most rewarding of all for me is the music for “Coney Island” that captured the emotional release at the climax of the story, the ascent of the carousel away from the Mayor’s tower. This theme, portraying Lev and Mara as they float their way toward the old amusement park, is both beautiful and haunting, orchestrated in the unusual combination of euphonium and flute. The return of Ana’s theme, in its triumphant variation celebrating the return of the coffee shop, puts a smile on the audience’s face, before Argue takes the music to a dark place as Lev stares blankly at the horizon. I can’t help but wonder if the emotional impact of Argue’s music hints at a side of the composer that is far less cerebral than my interview with him otherwise suggested.

**Future Research**

This research will continue, comparing the deeply personal introspection of Maria Schneider’s rural experience with Žeželj’s outlook on loss, and her musical depiction of the Midwestern landscape in *The Thompson Fields* with Argue’s cityscape. Further analysis will focus on the composers’ efforts to extract new sonic possibilities from their big bands, while their views on social activism will also be explored.

Regarding future research on *Brooklyn Babylon*, there are more avenues that could be explored. Continuing investigation of the work’s reception by audience members could broaden knowledge of its impact and interpretation beyond the artists’ perspectives. Reviews of the work’s CD recording could reveal how well the music stands on its own apart from the theatrical presentation. The placement of *Brooklyn Babylon* among other contemporary and historical large-scale jazz compositions could be explored for developments in the genre.
Regarding further musical analysis, the episode “Builders” could be explored for Argue’s scheme of rhythmic contraction. Another episode not included in this study, “Construction/Deconstruction,” would benefit from an analysis of its form as a demonstration of interconnectedness within the work. As Argue is a Duke Ellington scholar, his web writings on the composer could be explored for influences in *Brooklyn Babylon*. An analysis of music from his first album, *Infernal Machines*, as well as his subsequent atonal multimedia work *Real Enemies* could provide insight into his compositional trajectory. His blog posts on the music industry and current events could reveal more of how he sees his role as an artist.

As for Žeželj, reviews of his *Brooklyn Babylon* graphic novel could provide more insight into how the work was received. The artist’s website provides links to his other graphic novels as well, offering a researcher a rich resource for bringing additional insight into this artist’s worldview. An understanding of the artist’s choice of the graphic novel and stop-animation format could also be informative.

**Performing Brooklyn Babylon**

Jazz educators interested in *Brooklyn Babylon* may want to bring music from the work into their ensembles. Although a recreation of *Brooklyn Babylon* is not possible (Argue will not allow a performance of the work with the film), some of the music for the work is accessible for advanced college jazz bands. As previously stated, the score and parts for “The Neighborhood” are available for purchase from the artist’s website, and I can confirm that Argue has completed the copying of the music from the rest of the work. I recommend contacting the composer directly for additional information. Before attempting to perform any music from *Brooklyn Babylon*, I advise downloading the complete score from the website and reviewing the technical
demands of the episode of interest. Accommodation will need to be made for the most challenging woodwind parts. Including information from this dissertation and a synopsis of the storyline may be of interest to your musicians and the audience. I highly recommend multiple performances if possible to allow students every opportunity to explore this music more fully.

Having recruited an ensemble, planned rehearsals, and conducted a performance of the music from *Brooklyn Babylon*, I can relate my own experience in accomplishing a realization of Argue’s music for the work. Although I directed the entire score in consultation with Argue, the following comments could be applicable to select episodes and provide perspective for an approach to this music.

The score preparation was extensive, requiring considerable practice in effectively conveying the many meter and stylistic changes while constructing an overall approach to the score. I was fortunate to have had previous conducting training, and I would not recommend the work for a music director with limited conducting experience. Rehearsals had to be carefully planned as not all the musicians were needed for every episode. Sectional rehearsals were fundamental for the most challenging passages while careful explanation of tempo, time signature, and rhythm were required to prepare the musicians for the many changes in style they would encounter.

The music requires technical ability on the part of the wind instrumentalists that exceeds the level of most collegiate big bands. It was written for professional saxophone/woodwind doublers in New York who, by their own admission, were intimidated by the writing. By bringing in classical flautists and clarinetists, I successfully realized the most challenging woodwind writing while accommodating the requirement for two bass clarinets and a contrabass.

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72 Davie Pietro, alto saxophonist in Argue’s Secret Society big band, related that he thought the work should be called *Holy Sh** Babylon*. 
clarinet. A first trombone part that requires doubling on Euphonium in an extreme high register was fortunately realized by an advanced doctoral student at UIUC.

Twelve 90-minute rehearsals were planned, including the dress rehearsal, and the performance on February 23, 2019 was well-received. During the presentation, a representative frame of Žeželj’s imagery from the episode being performed was projected onto a screen behind the musicians. This required Argue’s approval. I also included in the liner notes for the program a summary of the action in each episode. This approach created the atmosphere of the actual performance while giving the audience some reference points to follow. The success of the project was due in no small part to the efforts of the musicians and their high level of technical ability. I was privileged to have the resources of a prominent music school to draw upon. My only regret is that I wish additional performances would have been possible to give the musicians more opportunities to realize the depth of the work. Fortunately, I was able to have the performance professionally video recorded, and it is available on YouTube.73

For the student of jazz, and for jazz educators and researchers alike, I hope this research will encourage more interest in the “looking under the hood” of works as they are approached for performance or study. While this study was enhanced by theories of nostalgia and landscape, a future researcher might use other social or personal concepts as a lens to enhance their understanding of a work. What can be revealed will not only excite the imagination, but also lead to more engaging musical performances for the audience. My hope, as well, is that Brooklyn Babylon will serve as an example of how jazz composers can collaborate with artists of other disciplines to produce presentations of extraordinary impact, expanding the horizon of possibility for new works.

73 https://youtu.be/8AAbVicrdk0.
References


