"I know now, all that was just … play."
—Samuel Beckett, *Play*

"Play" is often positioned as the opposite of "work"—where work is effortful, serious, and practical, play is frivolous, unserious, and distracting. In the current neoliberal era, play is generally the province of children and animals, and seen as something that proper adults should limit their engagement with. A respectable hobby or some light recreation after a solid week's work is acceptable, but full-hearted, devoted, unselfconscious *play* puts one at the risk of seeming immature, compulsive, or childish.

Children play with no effort. They navigate a spectrum of reality by suddenly make-believing something is what it isn't and vice versa. They give meaning to the meaningless and undermine reality by allowing its existence to fade.

Our labor is often routine, monotonous, and engaged in by obligation—or worse, coercion—while play is spontaneous, stimulating, entered into by invitation ("Wanna play?"). However, the barrier between the two can be far more porous than this contrast suggests. We all know of play that is effortful, focused, and energy-intensive: the intellectual rigor of a chess match, the physical exertion of of a soccer game, the skill, craft, and sweat that goes into creating cosplay attire—or any work of art for that matter. Likewise, some of our most important work—preparing meals, caring for children, scientific discovery—is imbued with the creativity, curiosity, and sense of adventure we normally associate with play.

Playing is also a paradox because it demands a suspension of objective fact-gathering while also requiring constant analysis of cause/effect relationships–which can seem endless and maddening. If we can't enter into a space of genuine wonder not inhibited by our analyzing mind, we lose a critical, authentic part of what play is.

This collection of pieces emphasizes the playfulness, punny-ness, and absurdity of Wooden Cities. Wordplay and soundplay has always been a huge part of what we do as performers, but also as a group of friends. Parts of this album feel like a peek into a band hangout, with banter and jokes punctuated by improvisations and sound experiments. There is also cross-genre interplay here—music in conversation with visual art, with poetry, with theater. To me, this is a mirror of the inter-genre fluidity of

Buffalo's small, tight-knit arts community as much as it is about Wooden Cities' varied interests.

Most of the music on this record is playful—that is, it is unserious, unproductive, and has no practical use—and it is all the more valuable for it. It is marked by spontaneity, curiosity, and imagination, all directed not toward any productive end but simply toward the delight of making and listening to these frivolous sounds. Like all the best play, its creation was diligent, labor-intensive, and sublimely exhausting. I'm grateful to Wooden Cities for constructing a space in which play is not merely a peripheral diversion, but an all-encompassing, full-bodied commitment to creativity, exploration, and discovery.

Will Redman, *Book: Wooden Cities*

Book (2006) is an unordered collection of 98 graphic compositions. The compositions represent extensions and extrapolations of conventional music notation and are available for use in any part, for any duration, by any number of performers, in any place, at any time.

The title convention for versions of Book is to use a colon after the title and then a description of the particular interpretation – Book: (instrument abbreviations, ensemble name, performance location, etc.).

—Will Redman

Book is one of the foundational "texts" of Wooden Cities, and a piece that feels perfectly suited to the ensemble. Graphic scores have always been important to us as an exercise in working in the space between strict notation and free improvisation. Playing this piece feels like becoming part of a giant beehive absorbing a piece of complicated information—we're constantly split between reading that information individually and reading the hive response to that information, and finding a way to keep the formation together all at the same time.

Book is one of the earliest pieces Wooden Cities performed as an ensemble, and it's one we consistently come back to. Will's calligraphic abstract notations offer so many possibilities, and so many challenges, that the piece is one that is capable of growing

with a player/ensemble, changing over time. We play this piece differently than we did ten years ago, and I'm sure we'll play it differently still ten years from now. At 98 pages, the score itself is an inexhaustible Library of Babel of musical possibilities, but one could even find a macrocosm of sonic landscapes in a single page.

Kurt Schwitters, *Ribble Bobble Pimlico* arr. Ethan Hayden

The radical German artist Kurt Schwitters fled his native country in the 1930s after his work was included in the Nazi *Entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art") exhibition. He ultimately settled in England in the following decade, during which he composed the sound poem, "Ribble Bobble Pimlico." The work is named for the River Ribble, which runs through Northern England, and Pimlico, the London district which is home to the Tate Gallery. The poem consists of developing variations of a few brief expressions (e.g., "Good deal easier," the name "Andrew Invergowrie," and the poem's title).

Ribble Bobble Pimlico is one of my favorite Wooden Cities staples. This piece is difficult, complicated, and requires extreme precision, but when the painstaking rehearsal is finished, it's pure joy and hilarity to listen to.

We've performed this piece so many times it seems that our personalities and idiosyncrasies have been absorbed into it (and, perhaps more frighteningly, vice versa). The clumsy rhythms which roll like an asymmetrical wheel (Pip!   Ribb! Pip!   Ribb!), Evan's chameleonic vocal inflections ("R?", "rrrrrRibbip"!), Brendan's stern, occasionally disappointed voice ("Pi- *sigh* -pimlico"), Katie's Western New York accent gloriously transfiguring the text, even my own increasingly ridiculous "U"s—all seem to come from us as individuals and our experience as an ensemble, but all seem to be equally indigenous to the poem itself. We aren't performing, arranging, or interpreting this poem, we're loudspeakers amplifying it as it amplifies us.

Evan Courtin, *Good Form*

The poem "Good Form" was written by Marina Blitshteyn. It is a variation of a villanelle, a poetic form consisting of five stanzas of three lines and a final stanza of four, with the first and third lines of each stanza rhyming, and the second line of each stanza rhyming. My three-voice setting is designed to bring out the rhyme scheme and adds a comedic element to a work with dark undertones and offensive language.

—Evan Courtin

Marina Blitshteyn's writing is sharp and

funny, with a strong musical sense. She plays with the sound of words as a shifting screen layered over meaning. Evan's setting emphasizes these qualities—he preserves the sonic play and dry humor in Marina's writing. There is also a theatrical aspect of her writing that makes so much sense brought into three dimensions with Evan's piece.

Good Form is kind of terrifying in how accurately it seems to depict one's internal monologue. The three voices are not in conflict—for instance, there's no identifiable ego or super-ego characters—but neither do they speak in a singular unanimous voice. Instead, the stream of thought continues in a dizzying, circuitous path, getting distracted, defensive, encouraged, self-satisfied, conversational, repetitious, all while expressing a short, relatively simple few sentences. It frighteningly emphasizes how thinking beings are never really alone, how our psyches are flittering multitudes of voices—which is still a strangely lonely idea.

Ethan Hayden, *from Gertrude Stein's "In"*
Gertrude Stein's "In" was originally published in the collection *Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces* (1953). In this setting, two speakers read excerpts of the text while five instrumentalists perform punctuating actions in sync with particular words. The piece was written quickly, spontaneously, more like an improvisation than a pre-planned composition, which seems fitting for a work as playful and exploratory as "In." Stein's words seem to delight in simple pleasures like juxtaposition, pattern, and repetition. This piece takes inspiration from these same impulses and attempts to emphasize them, setting not so much the meaning of the words as the charms of their organization.

—Ethan Hayden

I love the way Gertrude Stein plays with meaning and nonsense, and with the inherent absurdities of communication through language. Ethan's setting, by assigning specific sounds to specific words, emphasizes Stein's process and sets in motion a parallel layer of sonic absurdity.

It's no surprise to me that we "play" music. Wooden Cities is, among many other things, a playground. The work of play happens in a carefully curated place. Preparing the pieces transitions to wondering, finding, showing, and knowing in ways that would not happen if the

players' minds were inhibited by an inability or an aversion to play. With this *collection* of people, whether long-time Wooden Citizens or those who stop for a visit, the community created around this music is meaningful, in part, because of play; the suspension of reality, a striving for happiness, comedy in the high- and low-brow, *joy*, and a meaningful intention created together.

Brendan Fitzgerald
Ethan Hayden
Megan Kyle

Book: Wooden Cities
    Megan Kyle, oboe
    Ethan Hayden, trombone
    Brendan Fitzgerald, guitar
    Nicholas Emmanuel, piano
    Evan Courtin, violin
    T.J. Borden, Katie Weissman, cellos

Ribble Bobble Pimlico
    Evan Courtin
    Brendan Fitzgerald
    Ethan Hayden
    Katie Weissman

from Gertrude Stein's "In"
    Megan Kyle, english horn
    Brendan Fitzgerald, percussion
    Ethan Hayden, voice
    Nicholas Emmanuel, piano
    Evan Courtin, violin
    Katie Weissman, cello/voice

Good Form
    Evan Courtin
    Brendan Fitzgerald
    Ethan Hayden

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W O O D E N   C I T I E S

① ③ ⑤ ⑦

Will Redman
Book: Wooden Cities
(2006)

② Kurt Schwitters
Ribble Bobble Pimlico (1946)
arr. Hayden (2011)

④ Ethan Hayden
from Gertrude Stein's "In"
(2015, rev. 2018)

⑥ Evan Courtin
Good Form (2011)