



SCHOOL OF MUSIC

JOHN V. ROACH  
HONORS COLLEGE



Present

**Honors Composition Recital**  
**Joseph Hill Tullis**

March 29, 2026

12:30 p.m.

Pepsico Recital Hall

**Program**

- Abruptability (2024)\*  
*Sam Brown, clarinet; Vincent Li, piano; Joseph Tullis, viola*
- String Quartet (2025)\*  
*I. Decisive*  
*II. Desolate*  
*III. Angry*  
*Joseph Tullis and Laura Pollack, violin; Abby Douglas, viola; Grady O’Gara, cello*
- Empty Skies (2023)  
*Pablo Albert, Dawson Bauman-Herl, Diego Tapia, clarinet; Nolan Golden, bass clarinet*
- Split Resonance (2023)  
*Joseph Tullis, viola*
- Sonata for Piano and Saxophone (2023)  
*Kyle Cornelison, piano; Jerry Olazaran, alto saxophone*
- The Aim Was Song (2022)  
*Sofia Dahm, alto; Kyle Cornelison, piano*

*\*indicates premiere*

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Upper Division Honors in the John V. Roach Honors College. Joseph Tullis is a composition student of Dr. Martin Blessinger, Dr. Till Meyn, Dr. Neil Anderson-Himmelspach, and Mr. Trey Gunter, and a violin and viola student of Dr. Elisabeth Adkins and Dr. Misha Galaganov.

Recording and photography are prohibited.

Please silence all electronic devices including watches, pagers, and phones.

***Abruptability*** for clarinet, viola, and piano (2024)

In March 2024, I submitted *Abruptability* for clarinet, viola, and piano to the Soli Chamber Ensemble's new music competition, called "30x30x30." The contest supported early career composers by providing performance opportunities for the thirty winning compositions by thirty composers in honor of Soli's thirtieth anniversary. The instrumentation for the competition was left to the composer.

*Abruptability* opens with bright motifs in interplay between the clarinet and viola, knitting those themes together with ragtime and jazz-infused complement from the piano. The clarinet and viola transform those motifs into an episodic tone poem in the middle of the work. Eventually, syncopation and tight rhythmic interactions propel the same pantonal harmonies to an amusing conclusion.

*Abruptability* is marked by tight interaction and extreme syncopation, with no two measures the same. Throughout the piece, the instruments repeatedly have the same rhythm, slightly offset. Instead of two instruments playing in unison, they play in opposite unison, each filling up the negative space where the others are not playing:

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Clarinet in Bb (Cl. in Bb), Viola (Vla.), and Piano (Pno.). The score is in 3/4 time and starts at measure 29. The Clarinet part is in the treble clef, the Viola part is in the alto clef, and the Piano part is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The music is characterized by syncopation and tight rhythmic interactions. The Viola part has a forte (f) dynamic marking. The Piano part has a piano (p) dynamic marking. The score shows the instruments playing in opposite unison, each filling up the negative space where the others are not playing.

*Abruptability* is not a tonal piece in the purest sense, having little to do with tonics and key centers and scales. Yet it is marked by tonal centers and eventually falls back on them, resulting in a sound that is mostly consonant. The dissonance in the piece is not aggressive, resulting in a sound that is more bright than dark.

**String Quartet (2025)**

This string quartet was composed over a period of two years. The first movement has the most tonal approach, followed by the less tonal second movement. The third movement takes the form of an atonal fugue. The quartet comprises three loosely conforming movements that are rhythmically intense, aggressive, and flat-out high energy. This is the premiere of the piece.

The first and second movements are the most tonal of the work, establishing motifs that connect to the third movement. The slow second movement offers a look into the deconstructive nature of the third movement of the piece. The third movement is a fierce fugue that almost completely abandons tonality, demanding that the audience imagine the theme in the piece on their own. The movement is written with an underlying understanding that most audiences will hear it as fugal. Composing the third movement required taking melodic fragments and rhythmic ideas and processing them into a virtuosic conclusion to the quartet, while nodding slightly to the normal conventions of the fugue.

Compositional decisions in this quartet —the notes, pitches, and note values — explore unheard sonorities for these instruments that are uncommon and not yet in the common idiom. The thematic material takes advantage of stringed instruments in every way while remaining playable and performable. One instance stands out in particular in the first movement. The second violin plays in ordinary 3/4 time, but the first violin is playing triplets over it, with the second note of each triplet accented. The compositional idea was a moment of suspended time in which the first violin continues the pattern, but then the rest of the quartet comes in at the “wrong” part of the bar, making the middle accented note feel like the first note of a group.

There are precious few ways to notate this. One is to notate the movement in compound meter, which would increase the difficulty, even making the piece unplayable. The solution was to write a measure that contained an extra eighth note of a triplet. In turn, that measure has an irrational time signature.

Part of the challenge was figuring out how to make that look good on the page in order for performers to be able to play it by simply looking at the page, but also for performers to gain a comprehensive understanding of it by reading the performance notes as the beginning of the score. Both appear here:

3 groups of eighth note triplets  
plus one extra triplet eighth note

102  
(cresc.)

fff

Vln I.

Play

ff

Vln I.

Play

ff

Vln I.

Play

ff

*Performance notes:*

- This piece does not use a key signature - it has no tonic key.
- Glissando lines are present throughout the score. Unless specified, these slides can be played anytime and for any length within the specified note's duration.
- 15ma alta markings are often used to indicate false harmonics. Performers may play the written pitch and a touch-4 harmonic above it to produce the indicated note two octaves up. Performers may also use any combination of fundamental and partial to produce the indicated note.
- Tempo markings should be considered as upper limits. Slower tempos are welcomed; faster tempos are discouraged.
- All bowings not already indicated are left to the performers and are open to interpretation.
- Further manipulation of tempo and style beyond expressions that are printed is highly encouraged.

***Empty Skies*** for clarinet quartet (2023)

Tarrant County College offers a chamber music composition class each summer. It provides students of all ages with individual composition lessons and the chance to compose a piece and have it performed by a professional chamber music ensemble at the end of the summer semester. In the summer of 2023, the ensemble was a clarinet quartet comprising faculty from TCC and Texas Woman's University. It was an opportunity too good to pass up. *Empty Skies* is the product of that class.

The piece conveys the idea of aggregate management in composition: controlling which pitches occur in the music at any given time. In any given formal section of this clarinet quartet, I wrote, for example, nine of twelve pitches, reserving the remaining three for later. When they occur later in the piece, the listener might not know that it is intentional, but the listener knows that something is happening because those pitches do not sound like those that have already occurred. *Empty Skies* also mirrors thematic threads in the use of every available compositional technique. For example, waning energy in the score shows up in a fall in registry, a slower tempo, fewer instruments playing, elongated note duration, and changing modes of the scale:

The image displays a musical score for a clarinet quartet, consisting of four staves: Clarinet in B $\flat$  1, Clarinet in B $\flat$  2, Clarinet in B $\flat$  3, and Bass Clarinet. The music is written in 2/4 time with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 90$ . The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs and slurs, with dynamic markings such as *f*, *sfpp*, and *ppp*. The notation includes various articulations like accents and slurs, and the piece concludes with a final cadence marked *ppp*.

*Empty Skies* opens with a theme of sextuplets that have the sixth note nixed; the motif later becomes a quintuplet. Augmented triads in this first section give an unstable feel to the theme. The second section is a slow, rather demented waltz with minor intervals and diminished chords. The third section has a series of stacked fourths which lead to the climax of the piece, a full ensemble scale in the altissimo register that highlights the insistent timbre of the clarinet.

The musical score is for four clarinets: Cl. in Bb 1, Cl. in Bb 2, Cl. in Bb 3, and B. Cl. It begins at measure 158. The first two staves (Cl. in Bb 1 and 2) play a sextuplet of eighth notes in 5/8 time, with the sixth note nixed. The third staff (Cl. in Bb 3) plays a similar pattern but with a different rhythmic structure. The fourth staff (B. Cl.) plays a similar pattern. The meter changes to 3/4 in the second measure. The score continues with various rhythmic patterns and melodic lines for each instrument.

In each section of the piece, the quartet explores the depth of mood, evoking sound and content through tone.

***Split Resonance*** for solo viola (2025)

Music composition students received a call for new works in November 2024 for performance by junior students in the TCU School of Classical and Contemporary Dance Choreography Project in March 2025. I wrote *Split Resonance* in collaboration with a dance student. She requested that I compose a piece for a solo stringed instrument, and she asked that I play the solo myself, live. The piece had several revisions in response to the amount of time allotted to the performance and according to her needs in the choreography. Eventually, I shortened the score by half for the dance concert. In the end, the dance performance included just part of the piece, and I performed another short section of it on my junior recital in late 2025. The only full performance of the piece was at the TCU Composers' Recital in early 2025. *Split Resonance* was my first composition for unaccompanied solo instrument.

Two ideas govern the shape of this composition. First, the piece centers around a recognizable waltz that stubbornly emerges despite the use of modern harmonies and techniques. Second, the piece alternates between tonalities that are on opposite sides of the circle of fifths, thereby including polar opposite degrees of resonance on the viola (hence the title of the piece). In fact, there are two discrete sections in *Split Resonance* that end in D flat major, one of the worst keys in terms of the resonance on the instrument. It requires unusual technique and effort for the player to get those sections to sing in the same way that the instrument does in the key of G major, where open strings add volume and richness of tone. At times, my professor, a violist himself, was skeptical about the possibility of the piece ever working for the performer, particularly on the sections in D flat major. He eventually asked me to bring my instrument so he could understand the techniques I was using as the performer, not just as the composer.

The image displays a musical score for the piece *Split Resonance* for solo viola. It consists of three staves of notation. The first two staves are in 3/4 time and feature a waltz-like melody with various harmonic changes and dynamics. The third staff is in 2/4 time and includes a section marked 'gliss.' with a dashed line indicating a glissando. Below this section, there is a 'cresc.' marking followed by a dashed line, suggesting a crescendo. The score also includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

*Split Resonance* has a definite arc to its structure. It opens with a slow introduction followed by a capricious middle section that flip-flops between a fast waltz and a slow minuet tempo. At the end, the piece settles into D flat major, driving at high energy to the last notes of the piece.

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the piece *Split Resonance*. The notation is in bass clef and includes various rhythmic values, rests, and performance markings. The first staff shows a sequence of notes with accents and slurs. The second staff continues with similar notation, including a fermata over a note. The third staff concludes with a fermata, a double bar line, and the marking 'pizz.' (pizzicato). Below the third staff, there are performance markings: 'stacc' with a double bar line and a fermata, and 'pizz.' with a double bar line and a fermata.

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Oddly enough, when I performed this piece in April 2025, the intention was for the recital to include a full performance of the entire score. Once again, it was not meant to be. A baffling (and inexcusable) memory slip toward the end led me to skip part of the exposition and take up again at the recapitulation. This performance is only the second time it has been performed in its entirety!

### Sonata for Piano and Saxophone (2023)

In March of 2023, the prompt from the professor was “write something in sonata form.” It was an assignment that telegraphed certain expectations, but it was ultimately an opportunity to explore and test the conventions of form and tonality. During the class performance of this piece, the musicians said it was like playing “Mozart with wrong notes.”

The Sonata for Piano and Saxophone has an unassuming, almost Mozartean beginning, with only a few dissonant moments. It opens liltily, sounding classical and almost Viennese. The B theme includes metric modulation and nonfunctional harmony, both of which infect the recapitulation in tone and form. Random dissonant intervals pop up, changing the intensity and mood momentarily. Gradually, the piece strays from convention, departing from what a classically trained audience might expect.

In addition to disrupting the conventions of sonata form, this sonata disrupts the conventions of tonality — not as much as some of the other works on the program, but ruffling feathers nonetheless. For example, when the themes are recapped, they are recapped in opposite time signatures; in the exposition, the first theme is in simple metre, and the second theme is in compound:

Musical score for Alto Saxophone and Piano, measures 1-4. The Alto Saxophone part is in 4/4 time, marked *mf*. The Piano part is in 4/4 time, marked *p*, and features triplet patterns in both hands.

In the recap, they're flipped. The piece comes out of its shell:

Musical score for Alto Saxophone and Piano, measures 116-119. The Alto Saxophone part is in 3/4 time, marked *mp*. The Piano part is in 3/4 time, marked *p*, and features a complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand.

“The Aim Was Song” (2022)

Poem by [Robert Frost](#)

Before man came to blow it right  
The wind once blew itself untaught,  
And did its loudest day and night  
In any rough place where it caught.

Man came to tell it what was wrong:  
It hadn't found the place to blow;  
It blew too hard—the aim was song.  
And listen—how it ought to go!

He took a little in his mouth,  
And held it long enough for north  
To be converted into south,  
And then by measure blew it forth.

By measure. It was word and note,  
The wind the wind had meant to be—  
A little through the lips and throat.  
The aim was song—the wind could see.



**The Aim Was Song (2022)**

continued

Frost's poem inspired the music for this song, and my choice of a poem written in English was deliberate. I wanted to have a strong understanding of the poem before I considered how I would write the music. The poem turned out to be a standalone inspiration, and the song itself is a personal favorite. It is simple, tonal, and harmonically functional.

The structure of a poem can dictate how a composer sets it to music. Frost wrote "The Aim Was Song" in four quatrains of iambic tetrameter in an ABAB rhyme scheme. Two compositional decisions in this song hinge on that form. The unaccented syllable of the iamb prompted the decision to begin the melody on a pick-up note and guided the selection of note values throughout the song. The music does not start on a downbeat, because the intent was for the voice line to reflect the way a person would read the poem aloud.

Also, the shift in the expository structure of the poem after the second stanza marks a move from the descriptive part of the poem to the more narrative nature of the second two stanzas, where events happen and words carry more meaning. The song follows that in melodic structure. The Aim Was Song does not have formal sections or delineated breaks. Instead, it is an art song with motifs that are passed between piano and voice throughout. It starts in the key of F, followed by a D minor episode in the middle with a fermata. It moves to B flat and ends in that key.

As a composer, it helps to carry a certain understanding of linguistics and morphology and phonology. Even so, much of how that translates into creating music is subconscious. For example, in the ending of the song, the last group of resolutions: "The aim was song—the wind could see" repeats three times with the same perfect cadence in the piano. The repetition allows for progressive, nuanced interpretations of the last line of the poem. As a composer, I have not yet found the same level of inspiration from any other poem as I have from this one.