



# "Technology and Humanity: An Analysis of Songs for Digital Natives

by

Matthew Sebald

B.M., University of Grand Forks, 2018

M.M., University of Colorado Boulder, 2022

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

2025

"Technology and Humanity: An Analysis of Songs for Digital Natives

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis title

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Written by

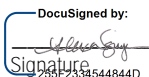
For a Doctorate Degree in Musical Arts

Robert Shay  
Main Advisor

Signed by:  
  
Signature  
199729CD9A5EE54A7...

4/29/2025  
Date

Alexandra Nguyen  
2<sup>nd</sup> Advisor

DocuSigned by:  
  
Signature  
285F233A544844D...

5/2/2025  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
3<sup>rd</sup> Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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# Abstract

**Matthew Sebald**

Name & Title

"Technology and Humanity: An Analysis of Songs for Digital Natives"

Thesis title

**Robert Shay**

**Robert Shay**

Directing Professor & Title

In 2017, Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson added to the ever-growing genre of the song cycle with the work *Songs for Digital Natives*. Written in traditional Western classical notation with influences from twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers, their work may appear standard, nondescript, and inferior to other song cycles like *La bonne chanson*, *Dichterliebe*, or *Die schöne Müllerin*; perhaps, on basic of music alone, this song cycle would be overlooked. However, the subject matter of Fisher and Thompson's work stands as unique. The poetry of all six songs comments on technology and reflects on how this has changed our world. Before this song cycle, there were no works that considered humanity and technology in this way. Certainly, the use of technology to create music was, and still is, common; but for two composers who grew up in the Digital Age to create a work challenging our perception of the benefits of technology deserves further research.

This paper will present an analysis of *Songs for Digital Natives*. To begin, the background of the work will be discussed, who the poets and composers are, and what trends are seen in song cycles written after 2000. This gives the reader an idea of what influenced the writing of this work. Then motives and musical characteristics are pointed out, detailing what aspect of technology they represent or emotion they evoke. Examples are shown how the songs connect musically, demonstrating the effectiveness of this work as a cycle rather than as a set of unrelated songs. The author then presents some conclusions on how this work subtly represents the effect of technology on humanity and how we should try to keep human connection.

**Technology and Humanity**  
***An Analysis of Songs for Digital Natives***

by

Matthew David Sebald

B.M., University of North Dakota Grand Forks, 2018

M.M. University of Colorado Boulder, 2022

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts  
College of Music  
2025

Committee Members:

Dr. Alexandra Nguyen

Dr. Margaret McDonald

Dr. Jeremy Reger

Dr. Robert Shay

Dr. Ryan Gardner

Sebald, Matthew David (D.M.A., Music)

Technology and Humanity: An Analysis of *Songs for Digital Natives*

Thesis directed by Professor Robert Shay

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## Contents

I.	The Work.....	1
II.	Trends in Songs Cycles of the Twenty-first Century.....	6
III.	Motives Illustrating Technology.....	11
IV.	Musical Characteristics and the Connection to Emotions.....	18
	A. Keys.....	18
	B. Melodic Contour.....	21
	C. Chords.....	22
	D. Meter and Rhythm.....	25
V.	Direct Musical Connections between Songs.....	28
VI.	Conclusion.....	31
VII.	Bibliography.....	33

## Figures

### Figure

2.1 Final measures of “Already Broken” from Ben Moore’s <i>Dear Theo</i> .....	9
3.1 Ending of “Sending Mail” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	12
3.2 Beginning of “Tools of Communication” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	13
3.3 Texting motive in “Pen’s Lament” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	14
3.4 Opening of “Insomnia” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	16
3.5 First chord of “TV Flashes On” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	17
4.1 End of “TV Flashes On” in <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	19
4.2 Key signature example in “Pen’s Lament” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	20
4.3 Repeated notes from “Pen’s Lament” in <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	21
4.4 Tritone fourths in “Tools for Communication” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	22
4.5 Dissonance in “Selfies” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	23
4.6 Harmonic counterpoint in “Pen’s Lament” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	24
4.7 Habanera rhythm in “Sending Mail” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	26
4.8 Habanera rhythm aria example from <i>Carmen</i> .....	26
5.1 Melodic duplication in “TV Flashes On” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	28
5.2 Melodic duplication in “Sending Mail” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	28
5.3 Chordal repetition in “Insomnia” and “Selfies” from <i>Songs for Digital Natives</i> .....	29

## I. The Work

In 2018, the composer duo of Michael Thompson and Jonas Fisher premiered, with Michael singing and Jonas at the piano, a new work for voice and piano at the University of North Dakota Grand Forks. *Songs for Digital Natives* was written for Michael's junior voice recital, but the unique text and treatment of the words sparked interest, leading to several performances and increasing the work's popularity. However, a quick search of recordings yields only the YouTube video of the premiere and a Soundcloud recording made later. Text painting fills each of the six short songs, an important tool for an art song composer. More importantly, the text relates to much of humanity worldwide. To quote the composers' program notes, "*Songs for Digital Natives* was written as a reflection on the effect technology has on the human condition."<sup>1</sup> As technology continues to advance and become an integral part of society, we must examine how it might change us and if we should choose to accept each of these changes. Much of the text in *Songs for Digital Natives* instigates a sense of nostalgia, a useful tool for comparing the old and new.

Jonas Fisher is a composer, educator, and pianist based in Grand Forks, ND, originally from Warroad, MN. As a composer, his works have been performed by the Red River Trio, Telegraph Quartet, Duo Cantabile, and the Princeton Singers. "He received a Master of Music degree in composition and a Professional Studies Certificate in technology and applied composition (TAC) from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music."<sup>2</sup> Currently, he works as the piano and organ department manager and lesson program director at Popplers Music. He served as an interim faculty member at the University of North Dakota Grand Forks, where he earned

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<sup>1</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Jonas Fisher, personal correspondence, January 8, 2025.

his undergraduate degree. As a freshman, he began a vocal/piano collaboration with Michael Thompson. Mr. Thompson is a music educator in Karlstad, MN, serving as the director for the choral and concert band departments for Marshall County Central Schools. His accolades include receiving “‘Teacher of the Month’ from his district two times, and his choirs have been invited to sing with collegiate ensembles on multiple occasions.”<sup>3</sup> During his undergraduate degree, Michael was an active vocalist, and his collaboration with Jonas resulted in exciting, polished performances. Their partnership and eventual friendship led to their work as a composer duo. Jointly they received the 2018 Outstanding Achievement Award in Music Composition and Arranging from the University of North Dakota Grand Forks as recognition for their song cycle, *Songs for Digital Natives*.

Each song in *Songs for Digital Natives* uses text taken from a different poet, thus six poets are represented. Michael completed the research for the text, searching for short poems focused on technology and humanity. Few songs written about technology existed at that time, despite the abundance of poems penned related to the subject. Michael’s research led him to six relatively unheard-of writers, with poems and short stories often only available on the internet. I present here a short description of each poet in the order that their text appears in *Songs for Digital Natives*.<sup>4</sup> Each poem can be found at PoetrySoup.com.

- “Haiku 30” (“TV Flashes On”), written by Timothy Hicks (American), uploaded in 2013
- “Sending Mail,” written by Robert Heemstra (origin unknown), uploaded in 2016
- “Tools of Communication,” written by Andrew Crisci (Italian), uploaded in 2015, songwriter
- “Insomnia,” written by Indio Ramos (Filipino), uploaded in 2014

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Thompson, personal correspondence, January 10, 2025.

<sup>4</sup>Note that the information was very limited and I am unsure if they are all still writing.

- “Selfies,” written by Bill Lindsay (British), uploaded in 2015, published a book of poems and short stories<sup>5</sup>
- “Pen’s Lament,” written by Supraja Kannan (Indian), uploaded in 2016

The number of poems each author has posted varies greatly. Many, however, consist of just a few lines; this was ideal for the musical work.

In the fall of 2017, Michael approached Jonas with the idea of writing a song cycle for his junior recital. They had collaborated since their freshman year as a voice/piano duo but only worked individually as composers. They were actively preparing Beethoven’s song cycle, *An die ferne Geliebte*, and had experienced as audience members full performances of Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*. The concept of the song cycle intrigued both Michael and Jonas because this genre requires a singular focused text, yet with some diversity between songs. In an interview, Michael referred to this as the idea of a “bouquet.”<sup>6</sup> They placed great importance on calling this work a song cycle and not a set, a group of songs only related by publication and composer and not content. They believed a cycle was “three dimensional”<sup>7</sup> and would allow more opportunities to collaborate as composers. The recital length had a limit of thirty minutes, and Michael had already chosen a large portion of the music; thus, whatever they wrote would need to be short. Completion of the work needed to happen before the end of the school year. Michael felt that song cycles appealed to their combined interest in leitmotifs, an important characteristic of *Songs for Digital Natives*. Often quite short, leitmotifs sometimes use only two or three pitches. Short lines of text would complement these musical units. Michael’s choice of text inspired Jonas, and the two young men embarked on their compositional journey.

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<sup>5</sup>I cannot confirm that Mr. Lindsay is the same author as that of the book.

<sup>6</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, Interview with author, Zoom, November 6, 2024.

<sup>7</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

In interviewing the composers, they both spoke of this musical work as innovative in concept. Though the focus and concept of addressing technology had not been used before in a classical song cycle, I felt the need to discuss with each composer if they had had any musical influence(s) while writing the work. Michael said his compositional process treated each line of text differently. With this technique, he switches between musical soundscapes very quickly. Jonas felt that his process was similar, but said that he compared his work to the music of composer Lori Laitman. Musical directions fill the pages of her songs, often changing every measure. For Michael and Jonas, they felt freedom in their compositional process because they were writing something unique. However, the music needed to stay within the classical music idiom. They desired to pay homage to their classical training and write something in a familiar musical language that would be relevant for their generation. By pairing text about technology with classical music, they hoped to bridge the gap for those born before and after the start of the Digital Age.

In the past one-hundred years, poets and composers have made it common practice to collaborate on large works. This practice allows composers and poets to share responsibility for the musical work's overall message. But the collaboration of two composers, rather than composer and poet, occurs rarely. Michael and Jonas's previous individual compositions differed in musicality so an obvious question to ask would be "did you ever disagree during the compositional process?" Perhaps because of their strong working relationship and eventual friendship, neither composer could recall a time of disagreement. They split the six poems evenly between them; once an initial draft of a song was complete, they showed their progress to the other composer for feedback. In the interview, both said they often took inspiration from what the other had composed. For example, the songs primarily authored by Michael feature disjunct

rhythms/pitches and “embrace discomfort.”<sup>8</sup> In the fourth song, “Insomnia,” Jonas blended his more neo-romantic style with influences of Michael’s musical style. This sharing of soundscapes lends to the work’s impact and cohesiveness as a song cycle. Though each composer was adamant about how they perceived certain lines of text, both stayed open-minded and complemented the other’s choices with their own.

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<sup>8</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

## II. Trends in Song Cycles of the 21st Century

In the world of music composition, we often find stylistic trends. These may not always be recognized or confirmed by the composers of the time, but an overview of the music written in a time period reveals common features. The song cycle became an established and treasured genre at the beginning of the nineteenth century and remains as such. We can recognize how this genre developed over the past two-hundred years, particularly in examining such elements as the choice of poets, use of the piano, and text painting. Though Michael and Jonas agreed that they felt they were writing something unique, the fact remains that no musical composition is completely one-of-a-kind. Some have said “music does not exist in a vacuum” and *Songs for Digital Natives* is not the exception. At the time of composition, this work was distinct for its message about technology, written in a classical style without the use of technology for the performance. However, four qualities based on the poetry chosen and musical style can be compared to other song cycles written during the twenty-first century.

To find similarities between *Songs for Digital Natives* and other song cycles written in the twenty-first century, I researched reviews and articles for upcoming performances of cycles written between 2000 and 2024. Though the work in question was not reviewed by a newspaper or journal, I did research song cycles whose performances did produce a review, leading to comparisons surrounding the text. Since vocal music stands distinct as the one musical genre with sung text, an examination of the type of poetry and poets used merits research. The six poets represented in *Songs for Digital Natives* appear generally unknown in the world of art song; I did not find any other musical works that use their texts. Jonas and Michael’s choice of poets contrasts greatly from the masters of the art song such as Schubert, Schumann, Fauré, and Poulenc. These latter composers frequently used texts from poets within their artist circles, and

on the rare occasion that they did not, the musical work brought attention to an unfamiliar poet. Typically, composers did not choose poets whose works had not been set to music until they as a composer had established their own reputation. But Jonas and Michael's decision to use poets not known within the classical music realm does relate to the choices of several other song-cycle composers in recent years. In 2008, Richard Mills's *Songlines of the Heart's Desire* premiered in Melbourne, Australia. The review notes the songs were "To settings by a multicultural spectrum of poets from the Persian Rumi to Judith Wright."<sup>9</sup> The two people listed in this quote are not unfamiliar in the writing world, but their recognition does not come from texts set to music. Similarly, the poetry for Rory Boyle's cycle *Watching over You*, premiered in 2015, was written by Dilys Rose, a Scottish fiction writer and poet. Rose claims many accolades as a writer, but composers do not frequently use her works. Numerous examples exist today where the poet represented in an individual song or cycle is unfamiliar to musicians.

The review of *Songlines of the Heart's Desire* introduces another aspect of comparison. Both that song cycle and *Songs for Digital Natives* use multiple poets. Again, referencing song cycles of famous composers from the past two centuries, we find that composers rarely, if ever, used more than one poet for a cycle. Using multiple poets requires the composer(s) to carefully link the poetry and songs, creating a unified theme. This does require more work but composers today choose this tactic, perhaps because of autonomy granted in creating the theme. In 2013, States News Service wrote an article on the New Voices @ CUA vocal festival. The author, John Slavin, references previous years of the festival where

the most intriguing trend is the use of non-traditional sources as vocal text. For the 2010 festival, we featured David Brown's "The Writing on the Wall," which used selected snippets of graffiti. This year, the festival features two pieces that use text pulled from the Internet: Yvonne Freckmann's "Nigerian Scam Cycle"

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<sup>9</sup>John Slavin, "Dream Duo in a Classical Tour de Force," *The Age*, May 26, 2008, LexisNexis Academic.

uses text from scam e-mails, and Carlos Gamboa's "Ramblings of a Social Network" uses status updates from Facebook as text.<sup>10</sup>

Here we see several examples of the use of non-traditional poetry and the use of more than one poet for a singular musical work. In interviewing Michael and Jonas, they noted the challenge in linking the songs because of using multiple poets. But they enjoyed the freedom to experiment and use music to link the songs rather than the poetry.

The final aspect of poetry that needs to be addressed deals with the subject matter. Before the twenty-first century, many song cycle's text themes describe reality, but lack truth in real stories. But the texts in *Songs for Digital Natives* portray a series of real-life events from the coming of the Digital Age. The review of the New Voices festival speaks of works written using actual emails, graffiti, and Facebook posts. These works link multiple true stories in order to comment on an event or theme of today. Lyle Cresswell's work *The Clock Stops*, which premiered in 2014, is based on the Christchurch earthquakes, but

'then things took on a much broader form,' Cresswell says. 'It's more or less a history of various cities, from the Turkish Catal Huyuk of 9000 years ago to the modern cities with their skyscrapers and skateboarders; from their birth to their destruction, whether it be through human or natural causes.'<sup>11</sup>

Composers continue to discover how compelling people's experiences are, especially major events, when commenting on aspects of society.

There remains one main aspect of musical style in song cycles that, though not completely new, features prominently in both *Songs for Digital Natives* and other twenty-first-century song cycles. I refer to the use of sounds similar to film music as a form of

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<sup>10</sup>States News Service, "Vocal Music Festival Set for Jan. 25-26," States News Service, January 11, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>11</sup>New Zealand Herald, "Song Cycle Ideal to Mark Visit," *The New Zealand Herald*, May 10, 2014, LexisNexis Academic.

text painting. As features of this musical work are described and heard, we will find soundscapes that are very descriptive, reminiscent of the music heard in films. The film music style exists frequently in other song cycles today, such as Ned Rorem’s *Another Sleep*; in a review of the 2002 premiere, “It was in fact the piano (expressively played by Simon Dunn) that set out and sustained each song’s compass.”<sup>12</sup> While similar to the text painting found in the works of other great song composers, composers today often write literal rather than figurative representations of the text. Ben Moore’s work *Dear Theo*, written in 2014, uses passages from letters from Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo. Figure 2.1 excerpts a passage from the sixth song, “Already Broken”; in this example, the quick cutoff of sound from the singer demonstrates the word “broken,” a technique not used for this word previously in the same song.

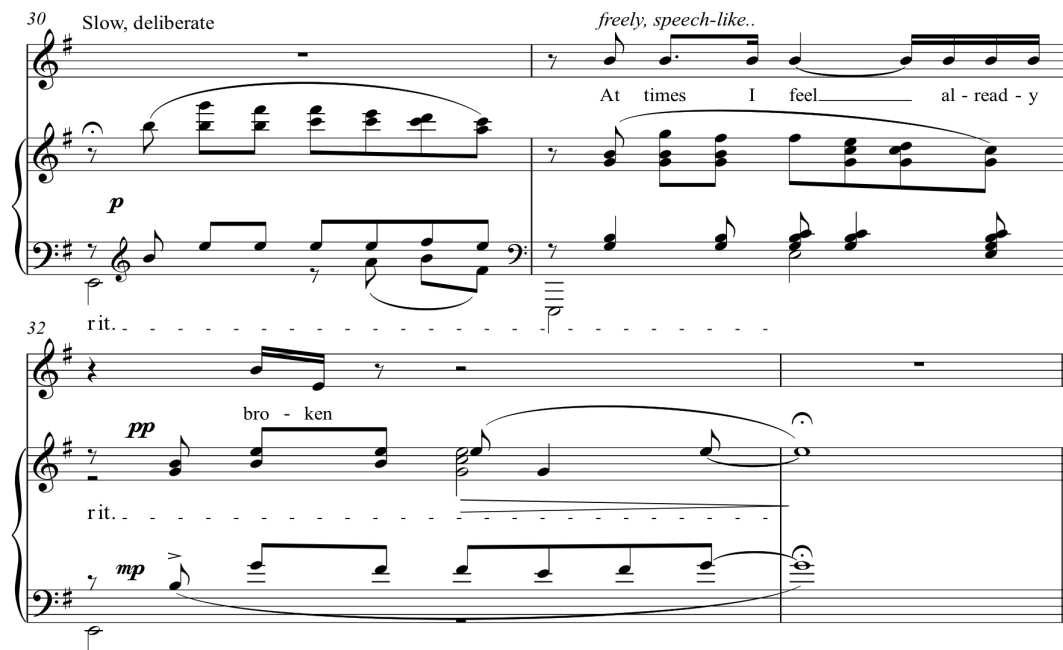


Figure 2.1 Final measures of “Already Broken” from Ben Moore’s *Dear Theo*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Anne Midgette, “Ned Rorem Limns the World of Loss - Correction Appended,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 2002, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>13</sup>Ben Moore, *Dear Theo*, ©2012, p. 24.

Moore's song cycle overflows with examples of literal representation of the texts. However, in this element of composition, *Songs for Digital Natives* takes the film music style of text painting beyond what other song cycles of the twenty-first century previously accomplished.

*Songs for Digital Natives* unintentionally followed some of the trends in the composition of song cycles today. The choice of poetry and poets manifests as particularly similar, as evidenced in the discussion. Yet the idea of a song cycle rooted in the classical style commenting on technology, but not using it for the performance, persists as unique. Because this type of song cycle had never been written before, Jonas and Michael were able to experiment like they were kids in a sandbox again. The rest of this paper explores how they portrayed the text as people born in the digital age, and how their song cycle comments on the relationship between technology and humanity.

### III. Motives Illustrating Technology

One of the most important aspects of art song centers on the use of text painting. Word or text painting can be described as “The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase.”<sup>14</sup> *Songs for Digital Natives* depicts technology in a way that is recognizable but not obvious. Michael said they kept asking themselves the question “How can we make it sound like technology is here without it actually being here?”<sup>15</sup> For example, the pitches of a ringtone can be notated, but instead, these composers chose to write music that sounds similar to the ringtone while not mimicking it exactly; they described this as being “symbolic.”<sup>16</sup> The following discussion details five examples of text painting used in the song cycle.

Poetry about cell phones exists prevalently throughout the cycle. One of the themes describes how texting has replaced other forms of communication. The second song, “Sending Mail,” imitates writing and sending letters.<sup>17</sup> Figure 3.1 shows the ending, where the sound of “text in a Flash” is introduced.

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<sup>14</sup>Tim Carter, “Word-painting,” Grove Music Online, 2001; Accessed 7 Jan. 2025, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000030568>.

<sup>15</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, Interview with author via Zoom, November 6, 2024.

<sup>16</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

<sup>17</sup>See section on Meter and Rhythm for more information.



Figure 3.1 Ending of “Sending Mail” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>18</sup>

In this example, the quick rhythm of the piano depicts the element of “in a Flash.” But the closely adjacent notes represent the relation to texting. Each triplet plus eighth-note unit in the first measure spans less than an octave, and there exist frequent relationships of half and whole steps. The first notes of each triplet are whole steps apart (C, D, E), and the relationship of the middle notes of each triplet and the concluding eighth notes relate as a half step apart (F-sharp to F-natural, G-sharp to G-natural, A-sharp to A-natural). Symbolically, this can be viewed as texting because in that situation, one’s fingers need to be close together. Additionally, to play this motive requires a vertical approach to the piano keys, which is also required when texting. I will refer to the unit of a triplet followed by an eighth note as the “texting” motive. Figure 3.2 features the beginning of “Tools of Communication,” the third song; here the motive reminds the listener of the sound texting makes. The text for this song states, in an ironically discomfoting way, that cell phones are “fun” and make life easier.

<sup>18</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 9.

Anxious ♩ = 300

Tenor

Piano

Figure 3.2 Beginning of “Tools of Communication” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>19</sup>

The final example of the texting motive occurs in the last song, “Pen’s Lament.” Here the composers slightly altered the motive to account for the nostalgic soundscape of this song. The pen laments that no one embraces it anymore. In the two other songs where the texting motive is used, the relationship of text and music creates a sense of chaos. Figure 3.3 shows the texting motive, but the final note of the triplet has been tied to the eighth note; in addition, the much slower tempo creates contrast. This subtle change comments on how the world can be nostalgic for a time before texting, but that this new technology always wins out.

When peo - ple — emb - braced me

*mf*

*p*

Ad.

Figure 3.3 Texting motive in “Pen’s Lament” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 21.

The symbolic portrayal of texting finds a different sound in “Insomnia.” In this song, Jonas, the primary composer, has expressly noted that the pianist play the trills with their thumbs. The awkward way of playing these trills produces a robotic, angular sound and looks like texting. In this sense, representation of text exists more literally than symbolically, although perhaps a truly literal sound would require the pianist to tap on the piano rather than play a pitch. Curiously, neither Jonas nor Michael use this effect in any other song, and here the technique replaces the texting motive. I believe the dark emotion represented in the song requires a labored and literal text painting. The text speaks of someone who suffers insomnia due to their addiction to the cell phone. The texting motive is used sardonically, but “Insomnia” lacks humor, making this motive sound out of place. Jonas’s choice to compose a different representation of texting adds more emotion to this song and nuance to the work as a whole.

During the interview, Jonas and Michael both felt that the fourth song, “Insomnia,” exists as the midpoint for the cycle, especially when thinking about the message of *Songs for Digital Natives*. Michael said that the way Jonas set the text comments on the “inevitability of technology.”<sup>21</sup> Jonas also felt that this song pushed his experimentation as a composer. As such, there occurs two additional motives illustrating technology that are only used in this song. The first dictates the playing of glissandi. Jonas has notated the glissandi to be short in length, with the direction “Relaxed, white-note glissando to imitate swiping across the screen.”<sup>22</sup> The glissandi occur after the first chord, making the dissonance sound of the chord almost normal. Jonas said he chose this chord to portray the “sound of a phone lighting up in a dark room.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

<sup>22</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p.14.

<sup>23</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

These two motives pair with the trills described previously, at the beginning of the song. This opening exemplifies the essence of film music. Listeners should be able to imagine someone trying to sleep when their phone lights up. The chord repeats three times, portraying the person ignoring the screen. Inevitably, the person picks up the phone, and begins to swipe and text. Notably, this is the only song with written directions about what the sound should portray. Figure 3.4 depicts the opening page of “Insomnia,” inviting the listener into a world they might be all too familiar with.

# IV. Insomnia

## Songs for Digital Natives

Text by Indio Ramos  
Music by Jonas Fisher

**Freely**

Tenor

Piano

leo

pp

mp

leo

mf

f

leo

- \* Relaxed, white-note glissando to imitate swiping across a screen
- \*\* Trill with RH and LH thumbs to imitate texting.

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Figure 3.4 Opening of “Insomnia” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p.14.

The final motive for illustrating technology happens in “TV Flashes On,” the first song in the cycle. Hidden within the first chord is the jingle used on the NBC network. This three-note figure in any key sounds as sol-mi-do. In A-flat Major, the key of “TV Flashes On,” those notes would be E-flat, C-natural, and A-flat. Figure 3.5 shows the opening chord, with each of these pitches represented.

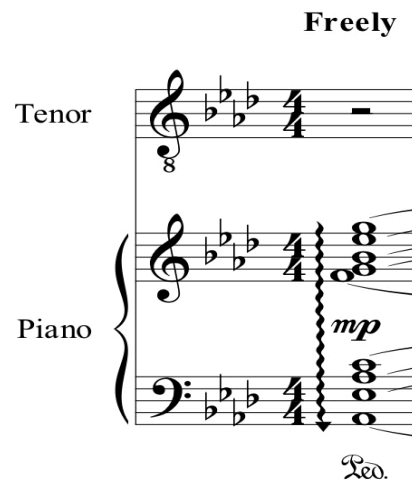


Figure 3.5 First chord of “TV Flashes On” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>25</sup>

We cannot hear the theme clearly, but Jonas said he deliberately made it obscure. However, choosing to write the chord to be rolled down, the theme becomes more obvious, since it ends on the tonic or do. Jonas said he prefers to compose chords rolled down, so this offered an easy compositional choice. Portraying the NBC theme ingeniously invokes the TV turning on, hence the title of the song.

<sup>25</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 6.

#### IV. Musical Characteristics and the Connection to Emotions

The presence of text makes art song a beautifully distinctive genre; with words, emotions are much simpler to identify. However, the way a composer chooses to set those words provides the avenue to the emotion that they want felt and thus directs the interpretation of a song. A number of musical choices that Jonas and Michael made for their composition promote the emotion they feel with the text. The characteristics discussed here will include keys, melodic contour, chords, and meter/rhythm. The composers manipulated each facet to represent two major emotions: nostalgia and discomfort. These emotions are given more specificity depending on the text and musical choice, but at least one remains present.

##### A. Keys

When glancing through the six songs that make up *Songs for Digital Natives*, one may notice that three of the six change keys more than twice. These three, “TV Flashes On,” “Insomnia,” and “Pen’s Lament,” were each written by Jonas. Notably, the three that Michael authored do not show a key signature, though they do have a sense of tonality at times. Both composers said their compositional process changed the musical characteristic for every line of poetry. Jonas frequently used key modulations to accomplish this. Sometimes, it was obvious. For example, in “TV Flashes On,” the final line of text is “black and white photographs frowning.” Until the word “frowning,” the music was written in the key of B-flat major; then, the music shifts to E minor to let us know the emotion of the “photographs.” This change of tonality gives the music a blend of nostalgia and discomfort, as we remember fondly what a black and white photograph was, but mourn how singular moments captured in time have lost their appeal. Important to this research, B-flat major’s tonic is a black key, but E minor’s tonic is a white key.

Furthermore, by keeping the singer on the same pitch as the key changes, Jonas reminds us that these world changes may be occurring during that person’s life. See Figure 4.1 for the musical demonstration of this.

The image shows a musical score for the song "TV Flashes On" from *Songs for Digital Natives*. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 8-14) is in B-flat major, 4/4 time, with a tempo of 60. The tempo is marked *rubato* and *mp*. The vocal line (T) has the lyrics "Black and white Pho - to - graphs". The piano accompaniment (Pno.) features a steady eighth-note bass line. A red box highlights the first measure of the piano part, and another red box highlights the key signature change to E minor in the final measure. A red arrow points from the first box to the second, indicating the key change. The second system (measures 15-21) is in E minor, 4/4 time, with a tempo of *a tempo* and *poco a poco rit.*. The vocal line (T) has the lyrics "Frown - ing". The piano accompaniment (Pno.) continues with the eighth-note bass line. A red box highlights the first measure of the piano part in the second system, and another red box highlights the key signature change to E minor in the final measure. A red arrow points from the first box to the second, indicating the key change. A red line labeled "Same pitch" connects the vocal notes in both systems, showing that the singer remains on the same pitch despite the key change.

Figure 4.1 End of “TV Flashes On” in *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>26</sup>

When listening to this song cycle multiple times, the ear hears how well “TV Flashes On” and “Pen’s Lament” bookend the work. Jonas effectively utilized shifts in keys for these songs. “TV Flashes On” personifies black and white photographs through a narrator’s voice, but “Pen’s Lament” gives the inanimate object its own voice. The pen proclaims that it misses “the old days,”<sup>27</sup> but the key change heralds the discomfort and nostalgia combined, when the pen says

<sup>26</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 20.

why it has this emotion. Figure 4.2 shows this change, specifically at the phrase “when people embraced me.”<sup>28</sup> Remarkably, Jonas reminds the listener of the first song by using the same key, E minor, from the word “frowning” at the critical moment.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Pen's Lament" from the album "Songs for Digital Natives". The score is written for voice and piano. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 5-8) shows a key signature change from E minor to G major, which is highlighted with a red box. The tempo markings are *liberamente*, *mp*, *a tempo*, and *f*. The lyrics are "I miss the old days When peo - ple emb -". The second system (measures 9-12) continues the piece with a *rit.* marking and returns to *a tempo*. The lyrics are "braced me When peo - ple emb - braced me". The piano accompaniment includes dynamics like *mf* and *p*, and a *tr.* (trill) marking. The key signature is labeled as "E minor/G major" at the bottom of the first system.

Figure 4.2 Key signature example in “Pen’s Lament” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>29</sup>

Though not every key signature throughout the cycle transforms the interpretation as in these examples, each shift in tonality does reflect the poetry and guides the listener to specific emotions.

<sup>28</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, pp. 20-21.

<sup>29</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, pp. 20-21.

## B. Melodic Contour

When considering how emotions are portrayed or emoted in a song, we must first consider melody and harmony separately. In looking at the melodies in *Songs for Digital Natives*, the emotion being conveyed seems ambiguous at times, at least without considering other musical characteristics. However, the end of “Pen’s Lament,” seen in Figure 4.3, sparked a question for me.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Pen's Lament" from the album *Songs for Digital Natives*. The score is in 4/4 time and is marked "Freely". The melody is written in the treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. The melody consists of four measures, each starting with a repeated note. The lyrics are "Now all is dig-i-tal \_\_\_". The piano accompaniment consists of four measures, each starting with a repeated note. The dynamics are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *p* (piano). The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#).

Figure 4.3 Repeated Notes from “Pen’s Lament” in *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>30</sup>

Jonas is known for his elegant melodies and as the author of this song, I was curious why he wrote repeated pitches for the melody. When asked, he said that the “repeated notes sound almost like an automaton,”<sup>31</sup> referring to the idea of a robot. By using repeated notes, the melody sounds inhuman, in contrast to the rest of the melody, and thereby recalling technology. Since the melody throughout the rest of this song has a more elegant contour, this final line sounds discomfoting.

<sup>30</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, Interview with author, Zoom, November 6, 2024.

To contrast the robotic sound of the repeated notes, Jonas wrote several lyrical melodies. (See Figure 4.2 above for an example of this in “Pen’s Lament,” linked to nostalgia.) But more importantly, we can see how Jonas uses the melodic contour to aid in shifting one’s emotions. Referencing Figure 4.1, the lyrical melody writing used for the text “black and white photographs” emphasizes a moment of nostalgia. But with the discomfort needed to indicate how technology causes the “frowning” of the photographs, the pitch G-sharp has been repeated. This quick portrayal of emotional change links to Jonas and Michael’s statement previously mentioned that with each change in the poetry, something would change in the music.

### C. Chords

After examining the melodic contour, harmony provides further exploration of emotional shifts. Michael shared extensively during the interview about their use of sevenths and tritones, often written as open chords. Indeed, the three songs where Michael was the primary composer, “Sending Mail,” “Tools of Communication,” and “Selfies,” all feature dissonance created by these intervals and chords. In “Tools of Communication,” the use of tritone fourths, seen in Figure 4.4, sounds very sardonic.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Tools for Communication". It consists of two staves: a vocal line (T) and a piano accompaniment (Pno.). The vocal line is in treble clef with a 7/8 time signature and contains several whole rests. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a 7/8 time signature and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic marking. The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The right hand melody includes several chords, with a specific focus on tritone fourths (intervals of a tritone and a fourth). Above the first few notes of the piano part, there is a tempo or rhythm marking:  $\frac{4}{8}$  2 + 2 + 3. The piano part concludes with a final chord in the right hand that includes a sharp sign (#).

Figure 4.4 Tritone fourths in “Tools for Communication” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 10.

However, when one considers the text, “cellulars are fun,” this dissonance feels and sounds like a clash with the words. In fact, Michael said this should “make people feel discomfort.”<sup>33</sup> His compositional style in the cycle took full advantage of this emotion. In “Selfies,” he combines the use of tritones and sevenths, but with some moments of consonance, creating a feeling of uncertainty. See Figure 4.5.

The musical score for "Selfies" is written in 12/8 time with a tempo of quarter note = 70. It consists of three measures. The Tenor part (top staff) is mostly silent, with a few notes in the first measure. The Piano part (bottom two staves) features a complex harmonic structure with tritones and sevenths. The piano part is marked *mp* and includes performance instructions *Ped.* and *simile*.

Figure 4.5 Dissonance in “Selfies” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>34</sup>

This uncertainty, a relative of discomfort, gives the text an air of irony. The music sounds as if we have walked into a New York City speakeasy featuring a jazz band, while someone in a dark corner says, “And to think that just a few years ago, we sat in front of our bathroom mirrors with sketchpads.”<sup>35</sup> Michael’s musical style highlights their commentary on the potential problems with technology.

<sup>33</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

<sup>34</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017 pp. 18-19.

When interviewing Michael and Jonas, they continued to use the word “open”<sup>36</sup> for various musical aspects, but particularly chords. Both composers have said in the past and in this interview that they enjoy more open chords because this type of harmony permits them to go down different musical paths that conventional harmony and chordal structure do not. Jonas demonstrated at the end of “Pen’s Lament” how combining the open chord structure with repeated notes creates a feeling of emptiness, again commenting on the inhuman essence of technology. In Figure 4.6, we see the repeated notes, which have been confirmed to imitate the robotic nature of technology, beginning with the voice part and continuing in the piano, sometimes changing octaves.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Pen's Lament". It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 13-16) features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The voice line starts with the lyrics "Now all is dig-i-tal" and includes a triplet of notes. The piano accompaniment has a bass line with repeated notes and chords. The second system (measures 17-20) continues the piano accompaniment with more complex chords and repeated notes. Red boxes highlight specific chords and repeated notes in the piano part, with a red line connecting them across the systems to illustrate harmonic counterpoint. Dynamic markings include *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *p* (piano).

Figure 4.6 Harmonic Counterpoint in “Pen’s Lament” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

<sup>37</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 21.

The chords in the piano become increasingly more open, often employing perfect fifths. However, the long length of the chords and the harmonic counterpoint shown in the example confirms the emptiness mentioned. Starting in measure 15, the left-hand notes shift to the right-hand in the next measure, imitating a slow wandering in circles. Jonas said that he wrote this part to emphasize the idea that we feel increasingly empty as we rely more on technology to communicate, rather than person-to-person or through the more effortful (and thus more thoughtful) means like a letter.<sup>38</sup> Though there exists some element of dissonance for many of the chords written here, there is also a sense of hope, indicated by the major tonalities employed. The composers seem to be saying that technology will always be here, but we can choose to what degree inventions pull us away from humanity.

#### *D. Meter and Rhythm*

Meter and rhythm remain as the final musical element to be analyzed. In the same way that Jonas's melodies are memorable, Michael's choices of meter and rhythm intrigue listener and performer alike. Because the three songs he wrote portray discomfort, he chose iconic examples of these musical elements that are familiar to many musicians' ears. When thinking about how he interpreted the poetry, however, these choices take on new meaning. In "Tools of Communication," the meter is often 7/8, with a division of 2+2+3. The text reads "Cellulars are fun: tools of communication that help simplify things." Michael said that he used this meter because it is "like you don't have time to finish a 4/4 meter."<sup>39</sup> The quick speed in this song ( $\text{♩} = 300$ ) and the irregular meter comments on the hurry that cell phones can bring, even while they

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<sup>38</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

<sup>39</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

“simplify things.” In contrast, “Sending Mail” is marked “heavily.”<sup>40</sup> Compare Figures 4.7 and 4.8, notably the left hand pattern and rhythm from “Sending Mail.”

Heavily ♩ = 70

Tenor

Piano *mp*

*simile*

Figure 4.7 Habanera rhythm in “Sending Mail” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>41</sup>

**Allegretto quasi Andantino.** (♩ = 72)

PIANO. *pp*

Figure 4.8 Habanera rhythm aria example from *Carmen*<sup>42</sup>

Figure 4.8 shows the opening to “L'amour est un oiseau rebelle” from Bizet’s opera *Carmen*; this aria’s rhythm earned it the nickname Habanera. Michael admitted that he was not intending to imitate this aria or even that type of rhythm, but, although not an exact transcription, he said “it

<sup>40</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup>George Bizet, “L’amour est un oiseau rebelle,” *Carmen*, Choudens Père et Fils, p. 43.

is pretty close.”<sup>43</sup> Michael said that for him this rhythm, with the presence of the tenuto on the fourth beat, gives “Sending Mail” a feeling of lethargy. This pattern repeats for a little less than half of the song. The lethargic, heavy feeling and sound imitates the laborious process of sending a letter, a return to symbolic sounds albeit not technology this time.

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<sup>43</sup>Fisher and Thompson, Interview.

## V. Direct Musical Connections Between Songs

As spoken of previously, Jonas and Michael chose to write a song cycle rather than a song set because they felt that cycles allowed for a broader story. Though many of the examples I have offered show how the songs connect to one another, there exist two direct musical connections not previously mentioned. The first uses melodic duplication and the second, chordal repetition. Both composers took inspiration from each other, sometimes resulting in a transcription of the same melody. This occurs between a melody in “TV Flashes On” and one in “Sending Mail,” each with a different primary composer. See Figures 5.1 and 5.2 for comparison.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The first part of the staff is marked *mp* and contains the notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. Red handwritten annotations 'm2', 'm3', and 'p4' are placed above the notes A4, B4, and C5 respectively, with lines pointing to the intervals between G4-A4, A4-B4, and B4-C5. The lyrics 'Black and white' are written below these notes. The second part of the staff is marked *rit.* and contains the notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. Red handwritten annotations 'M2', 'm3', and 'p4' are placed above the notes A4, B4, and C5 respectively, with lines pointing to the intervals between G4-A4, A4-B4, and B4-C5. The lyrics 'Pho - to - graphs' are written below these notes. The word 'Different' is written in bold black text at the bottom right of the staff.

Figure 5.1<sup>44</sup> Melodic duplication in “TV Flashes On” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>45</sup>

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef. The first part of the staff is marked *mf* and contains the notes G#4, A4, B4, and C5. Red handwritten annotations 'm2', 'm3', and 'p4' are placed above the notes A4, B4, and C5 respectively, with lines pointing to the intervals between G#4-A4, A4-B4, and B4-C5. The lyrics 'Pa - per stamp and en - vel - ope' are written below these notes. The word 'Different' is written in bold black text at the bottom right of the staff.

Figure 5.2<sup>46</sup> Melodic duplication in “Sending Mail” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Excerpt in B-flat major

<sup>45</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup>No key signature in this song

<sup>47</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, p. 9.

Figure 5.1, in B-flat major, matches interval to interval in Figure 5.2; the only differences occur with the addition of the G-sharp on the word “and” and the D-sharp on the last syllable of “envelope,” which if directly quoting should have been an F-natural. The linking of these two lines of text show a further connection: that both photographs and envelopes consist of paper. With the slight change of pitch, Michael kept the discomfort one should hear in “Sending Mail.”

The melodic duplication described was intentional on Michael’s part, although Jonas did not know about it until he heard the song. But they did want a connection between “Insomnia,” authored by Jonas, and “Selfies,” authored by Michael. There exists less of a textual link between these songs, the former commenting on people’s cell phone addiction and the latter considering how we traded photos drawn on paper for pictures on a cell phone. Certainly there is the connection with the reference to cell phones, but for “Selfies,” this reference comes only in the title. Figure 5.3 shows the last measure of “Insomnia”<sup>48</sup> and the first measure of “Selfies.”

Figure 5.3 Chordal repetition in “Insomnia” and “Selfies” from *Songs for Digital Natives*<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Top two lines are treble clef, bottom line is bass clef, no key signature.

<sup>49</sup>Fisher and Thompson, *Songs for Digital Natives*, ©2017, pp. 17 and 18.

Michael said that originally he did not have the high chord in the right hand as the opening for “Selfies.” But when seeking to make a musical connection between the two pieces, he decided to add it. Notice that the chord that ends “Insomnia,” minus the grace notes, has the pitches A-natural, F-natural, and C-sharp. The first chord in “Selfies” uses the same pitches, thereby linking the two song texts through pitch.

## VI. Conclusion

*Songs for Digital Natives* was born from the friendship of two amazing young musicians. It became a commentary on the inevitability of technology and how the Digital Age has transformed the way that humans communicate with one another. Jonas and Michael utilized texts from unfamiliar poets to create a song cycle filled with text painting, invoking a number of emotions, foremost that of nostalgia and discomfort. The songs do not disparage the good that technology can do. In fact, in “Sending Mail,” one might argue that technology transforms life, turning the labor-intensive task of sending a letter into the simplicity of texting. But there also exists an element of terror evoked in “Insomnia,” especially when we consider that humans may become addicted to cell phone use, even if initially seen as harmless. In reality, *Songs for Digital Natives* seems to present a bittersweet portrayal of technology.

Jonas and Michael were so pleased to revisit and remember how they had composed this cycle. Their perception has changed as they consider the depth each song text conveys. Michael said he makes the connection now between the short length of the cycle and the shortness in attention span for people today.<sup>50</sup> Consider how quickly we can lose interest in a project or tire of a task. Certainly, this is different for every person and highly dependent on what they are doing, whether it interests them or not. If Jonas and Michael had written a cycle spanning thirty minutes or more, would it have the same impact or would an audience member grow impatient, especially if not familiar with classical music concert standards? I propose that *Songs for Digital Natives* aligns with the attention span of people today, but also suggest that maybe we as humans need to slow down long enough to enjoy the good in life.

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<sup>50</sup>Jonas Fisher and Michael Thompson, Interview with author, Zoom, November 6, 2024.

Ultimately, this work emphasizes the importance of human connection. In “Pen’s Lament,” does the pen really mourn the loss of being embraced? Or should we understand this as a metaphor for how we feel when the majority of our communication happens through email, text, or another invention of the Digital Age? Technology will not disappear and clearly brings good for humanity through various uses. But perhaps we can improve our future by balancing how we interact with it. Instead of using technology to replace human-to-human connection, we can treat it as a supplement, knowing that our greatest joy occurs talking face to face with those we love.

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