



From Scratch: Writings in Music Theory. By James Tenney. Edited by Larry Polansky, Lauren Pratt, Robert Wannamaker, and Michael Winter. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. First Paperback Edition, 2019. 467 pp. ISBN 9780252084379.

<https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/78det5km.html>

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From Scratch: Writings in Music Theory by James Tenney, edited by Larry Polansky, Lauren Pratt, Robert Wannamaker, and Michael Winter, brings together the theoretical writings of one of the twentieth century's most exploratory composers and musical thinkers. First published in 2015, this text is freshly reissued in paperback. *From Scratch* is

a selection of twenty-two of Tenney's writings—an assemblage from his seminal books, journal articles, and previously unpublished works, organized chronologically. The collection spans Tenney's long career, representing, in the words of Larry Polansky, "the most abstract and fundamental of his prose, perhaps the musical embodiment of his occasional self-description as 'amateur cosmologist'" (p. xii). The editors all worked closely with Tenney before his death in 2006 to bring together the works in this collection, which are essential reading for any researcher interested in Tenney, twentieth-century music, and technology in music. For the readers of *CAML Review*, this compilation will be of particular interest. Between 1976 and 2000 Tenney taught music history, theory, and composition at York University, where in 1994 he was given the honour of distinguished research professor.¹ Tenney worked with giants such as John Cage and Edgar Varèse, among others, and, as such, was a Canadian link to the experimental developments happening in the US during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

1. Betty Nygaard King and F. Tim Knight, "James Tenney," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Historica Canada, published December 6, 2006; last modified December 16, 2013, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/james-tenney-emc>.



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In his introduction, Polansky provides insights into the compilation of this volume, structuring his essay around three themes: *Meta + Hodos* and related writings, writings on harmony, and writings on specific pieces. Polansky's understanding of the interwoven relationship of Tenney's works is particularly beneficial to a reader who is new to Tenney's work. Additionally, those who are wanting to deepen their knowledge of Tenney's analyses, algorithms, and theories will find Polansky's background with the works enriching.

Unique, notable, and first published in this collection are three articles that predate the seminal 1961 *Meta + Hodos*.² The influence of Gertrude Stein and John Cage on Tenney's early writing and musical thinking is evident in *Pre-Meta + Hodos* (1959), in which he writes, "The first fact is the act of listening, which, when nothing more, is living, and listening to this living, which we know as SILENCE" (p. 406). Written the same year, "On the Development of the Structural Potentialities of Rhythm, Dynamics, and Timbre in the Early Nontonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg" (1959) is an analysis of the music of Schoenberg focusing on nonharmonic traits including rhythm, dynamics, and timbre. Here, Tenney proposes a new approach to the study of twentieth-century music, one that steps away from atonal and serial theory. "On Musical Parameters" (1960-1961) is an early exploration of Tenney's interest in the attributes of perceived sound, and was initially intended to be included between sections of *Meta + Hodos* (1961). These three formative writings are a look into Tenney's theoretical ideas before *Meta + Hodos*; ideas that would be developed and apparent in later writings, including "Computer Music Experiences" (1964) (chapter 3), "John Cage and the Theory of Harmony" (1983) (chapter 12), and "The Several Dimensions of Pitch" (1993/2003) (chapter 17), among other essays, many included in this collection.

For someone who thought of himself as only "occasionally a theorist" (p. 380), Tenney had throughout his life developed profound and original ideas regarding music and harmonic perception. As Polansky writes, "Tenney wrote prolifically. The articles in this volume are just a part of his output, describing the most important theoretical ideas of his music" (p. xii). James Tenney's *From Scratch: Writings in Music Theory* is an essential addition to library collections with a focus on twentieth-century and experimental music and arts. The collection contains thorough supplementary information, including Tenney's written figures, tables, and examples, appendices, a section on the publication history of the essays, notes, and an index prepared by Amy Beal. *From Scratch* is the most current and seminal compilation of Tenney's writings, thoughtfully compiled by editors who worked closely with him during his life. This collection illustrates the principal theories of a twentieth-century leading composer and theorist deserving of this carefully edited publication.

2. James Tenney, *Meta + Hodos: A Phenomenology of 20th-Century Musical Materials and an Approach to the Study of Form and Meta Meta + Hodos*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: Frog Peak Music, 1988).