

# Journal of the American Viola Society

Volume 36 Number 2



**Features:**  
A Retrospective of African-American Violists  
The Works of 1919

# Journal of the American Viola Society

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On the Cover:  
**Kamron Coleman**  
*Violist*  
**Spray paint on board, 31x48**

Kamron Coleman ([www.kamroncoleman.com](http://www.kamroncoleman.com)) is a self-taught painter and sculptor from Salem, Oregon. His wife, Bethany Evans, is a harpist for several Oregon symphonies, and as his muse, has inspired numerous symphony works in oil and spray paint. His symphony-specific art has been used by symphonies, large and small, across the US to raise funds to support symphonies and music programs. The original spray paint on board 31x48 of "Violist" is available. Prints are also available at [www.kamroncolemanart.store](http://www.kamroncolemanart.store). Commissions and special projects are welcomed.



# Paul Neubauer's *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy*: Ringing in a Different Kind of Programming

By Joelle Arnhold

Paul Neubauer is a household name in the viola community. A two-time Grammy nominee and soloist with over 100 orchestras across the world, Neubauer is active today as a prominent American concert artist, as well as a dedicated educator on the faculties of Juilliard and Mannes. Less widely known and appreciated is Neubauer as a composer. Though he describes himself as primarily an improviser,<sup>1</sup> Neubauer does have one piece for unaccompanied viola: *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy*, written in 2008 for Joan Tower's 70th Birthday Concert. This programmatic piece tells the story of the composer/protagonist's futile effort to get in touch with Joan by phone—each time the protagonist calls, he is met with the busy signal. The piece's two idées fixes—the 11-digit phone number and the busy signal—and their variations reveal the development of Neubauer's persistence, frustration, angst, and ultimately defeat as he fails to talk to Joan. In addition to its musical storytelling, the piece also brings up intriguing questions about the role of humor in concert music.

## Musical Analysis

*Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy* is in E-flat minor and divides into three large sections and a very short coda. Although in three large sections, the piece cannot be called ternary, as the sections proceed more like ABC, rather than ternary's strict ABA. These three sections are characterized by the presence and absence of one or the

other idées fixes: The A section contains both the phone number and busy signal, the B section only the busy signal, and the C section only the phone number.

The A section begins with the dial tone and is followed by six statements of the phone number idée fixe (ex. 1). The first 3 statements closely mimic the classic dial sound, which the composer names explicitly in his performance notes: normal dialing, slowly, to make sure you dialed correctly, and the speed redial button.

The second set of phone number iterations begin in m. 8 and, while still recognizable as the phone number, begin to take on a fantasy-like characteristic suggesting that the music no longer describes the protagonist's literal behavior, but rather reveals his emotional state. These next three iterations reflect three distinct emotions: something like yearning (ex. 2a), increasing urgency (ex. 2b), and frustration (ex. 2c). The busy-signal (m. 19) that answers this final iteration concludes the A section.

Though the busy signal idée fixe still appears throughout the B section, the phone number idée fixe is absent. The melodic content of this section is instead built around the tension between B-flat (scale degree 5) and E-flat (scale degree 1). This V-i relationship is used programmatically in creating the sense of the low E-flat busy signal as inescapable, though the protagonist tries to avoid it. In example 3, measures 20–21 huddle closely around

The musical notation shows a dial tone (mf) in 4/4 time, followed by the first seven digits of a phone number: +1 (area code) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 60 and ♩ = 138.

Example 1. Paul Neubauer, *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy*, mm. 1–2.

Tempo I

Example 2 consists of three staves of music. Staff A is in 4/4 time, starting with a *subito p* dynamic and a tempo marking of *Tempo I*. It features a sequence of notes with a measure rest labeled '+1 (area code)'. Staff B is in 5/8 time, starting with *subito p* and moving to *mf*. Staff C is in 3/4 time, starting with *subito p*, followed by a section marked *ff marcato* with a tempo of  $\text{♩} = 208$  and *molto rit.*, and ending with *subito p* and *pizz.* (pizzicato).

Example 2. Paul Neubauer, Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy. A: mm. 7–11, B: mm. 12–16, C: mm. 17–19.

Example 3 is a single staff of music in 4/4 time. It begins with *mf dolce* and an *arco* marking. It includes a triplet of notes and a section marked *f dramatic*. The piece concludes with two measures marked *pf* (pianissimo).

Example 3. Paul Neubauer, Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy, mm. 20–23.

B-flat (A-natural and C-flat), as if denying the inevitable appearance of E-flat.

In the following measures, the melodic peaks become a high E-flat, G-flat, and an even higher B-flat. On the one hand, this pitch climbing suggests a sense of escape from the busy signal, as if the protagonist is about to break the cycle of the busy-signal's predictable answer to his repeated calls. However, even though the pitch-space from the busy-signal widens, the emphasized pitches remain within the E-flat minor triad. In other words, not only has the protagonist failed to escape E-flat, he has failed to travel at all. By about a third of the way through the piece, not only has the music not modulated, it hasn't even left the tonic triad. Measure 34 (see ex. 4) marks the first move away from E-flat minor, as the music briefly

moves into E minor (mm. 36–38), before it suddenly, but not surprisingly, is pulled back down to E-flat minor by the busy signal in measure 38.

This modulation from E-flat minor to E minor is aurally striking and dramatic. E-flat minor (6 flats) and E minor (1 sharp) are nearly as far away from each other as possible. However, there is an important need to distinguish between the theoretical and aural knowledge that E-flat and E minor are very far apart, and the practical, embodied knowledge that E-flat and E minor are actually very close: in terms of the mechanics of the viola, these keys are merely a half position apart. While the key relationship may sound distant, the small physical negotiation between E-flat and E is what really matters here. The protagonist has not managed to circumvent

♩ = 60

♩ = 76

*poco* *poco* *poco*

Tempo I

Example 4. Paul Neubauer, Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy, mm. 34–39.

♩ = 42

pizz.

*mp*

Example 5. Paul Neubauer, Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy, mm. 40–44.

sul pont.

*mp*

gradually ord.

*molto rit.*

Example 6. Paul Neubauer, Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy, mm. 65–67.

the busy signal by changing keys, but rather, he is so frustrated by the endless busy signals that he has slid a half-step sharp. The second section concludes with a close recollection of the tension between E-flat and B-flat from the beginning of the second section, particularly the A-natural, C-flat (respelled as B-natural) huddling around B-flat (ex. 5).

The C section is defined by the presence of the phone number *idée fixe*, and absence of the busy-signal. Without the busy-signal to mark time as the phone goes

unanswered, this section seems more of a dramatic aria than a strict programmatic narrative. “Aria” is meant in a literal, operatic sense of the term: if the recitative is where the action of the story unfolds, the aria is the lengthy and dramatic meditation on a single emotion, in this case, the event of dialing Joan’s phone number over and over again. Ironically (this is a humorous piece, after all), while the protagonist is lost in a slew of phone numbers, his attention turns away from the trials of Joan’s phone, and finally modulates from E-flat minor to B-flat major in m. 65 (ex. 6).

Shortly after landing in B-flat major, what has caught the protagonist's attention reveals itself in measure 66: the Mr. Softee ice cream truck jingle. In New York, Neubauer's home, the Mr. Softee tune is so common it is considered by New Yorkers to be one of the most indicative sounds of summertime. It is so prevalent that, in the summer of 2004, Mayor Michael Bloomberg attempted to ban the jingle as part of the administration's noise control initiative, which actually partially succeeded—Mr. Softee trucks are only allowed to play the tune while driving.<sup>2</sup> As a New York resident, Neubauer's quotation of this jingle suggests that the protagonist becomes distracted from his business with Joan's phone, and is momentarily drawn back into life outside the phonenumber. However, this distraction does not last long: measures 68 and 69 modulate back to E-flat minor and into another quotation, this time of Penderecki's Cadenza (see ex. 7). Neubauer points out that the quotation could also be from the Russian folk song "Dark Eyes."<sup>3</sup> In addition to its function as a dual-quotation, these measures recall the huddling motion around B-flat from section B.

This is followed by a third quotation: a loose rendition of John Walter Bratton's "Teddy Bear Picnic." Bratton's tune was a popular two-step in the early 20th century, and later, once lyrics were added in the 30s, a popular children's song. However, Neubauer quotes it here as part of a running gag he shares with his close friend, cellist Fred Sherry.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the particular chorale texture here recalls works like Britten's *Lachrymae* and Hindemith's *Trauermusik*, both of which prominently feature a chorale near the end of the piece that is melodically related to what came earlier. Indeed, The Teddy Bear Picnic here becomes a nice variation on the phone number *idée fixe*, as seen in example 7.

The very short codetta is a truncated and loose return of the A section; it consists only of a final statement of the phone number and busy signal. The slower tempo, *senza vibrato* and *niente* markings evoke a clear image of the

protagonist dialing Joan's number one last time, only to let the phone drop from his ear, defeated by the busy signal.

All told, *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy* is just a bit over five minutes (so it will fit on any recital program), is firmly in a contemporary music idiom (so it would add some nice variety to recitals seeking to add some 21st century repertoire), and is at an accessible difficulty level for performer and audience (only slightly more difficult than the Kodaly *Adagio*). As an added bonus, its amusing genesis story lends itself well to an engaging re-telling to audiences.

However, despite the many strategic advantages this piece affords, the only time I have heard it performed is on YouTube, which I only accidentally found while searching for videos of Joan Tower's *Wild Purple*. Its unpublished status certainly contributes to its obscurity. Additionally, while my own performances of the piece seemed well-received, there was not a strong interest in how to get the score and learn it, even from audiences specifically interested in viola repertoire. I find this lack of interest in the piece to be curious. In the remainder of this article, I will explore some possibilities for the difficult appeal of *Joan*, and argue that, not despite, but because of its non-traditional humorous slant, this is not only a good, functional recital piece, but also an interesting challenge to some problematic elements of concert programming.

### Music and Humor

Neubauer's piece and others like it run into a unique obstacle blocking their paths to the recital program circuit: a "humor prejudice" in the classical music world. While Peter Schickele, the musician/composer mastermind behind PDQ Bach, has complained of the "stuffiness" of classical music's codes of behavior (not clapping between movements, dressing nicely, etc.), and argued that their stuffiness belies the generally down-to-earth and welcoming personalities of the musicians, classical music and humor nevertheless seem

(Teddy Bear Choral)

+1 (area code) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Example 7. Paul Neubauer, *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy*, mm. 68–72.

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to co-exist uneasily.<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, YouTube user KhagarBalugrak's strong negative reaction to Neubauer's recording of Joan:<sup>6</sup>

Actually, I take [previous comment that this piece is terrible] back. This piece is wonderful. Instead of communicating something deep, it communicates the superficial, which has its own sort of depth. Instead of communicating beauty, it communicates ugliness, which is beautiful in its own right. Instead of communicating that which uplifts people, it instead ascends to the height of depravity, which of course has its own virtues. Wait. No. I take that back. This piece is abysmal.<sup>7</sup>

While this reaction may be atypical, the commenter is circling, if in somewhat dramatic terms, a commonly held belief that there is something about humor that doesn't quite have a place in "good" music. Leonard Bernstein, in one of his Young People's Concert Series lectures titled *Humor in Music*, goes to great lengths to conceptualize humorous music as a "lesser" art. Bernstein structures this lecture hierarchically, so that certain types of humor, for example the wrong-note jokes in Mozart's *Ein musikalischer Spaß*, are described as "the lowest you can go,"<sup>8</sup> whereas musical satire is deemed to occupy a space of greater cultural legitimacy. Accordingly, Bernstein presents Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*, which he describes as one of the greatest musical satires ever written, in its entirety, an arguably strange choice in a lecture meant for an audience of children.

The third movement of Brahms's *Symphony No. 4* is the only other musical unit the lecture features in its entirety. Bernstein prefaces the performance with the explanation that, while the piece is not humorous, it is "in good humor."<sup>9</sup> Bernstein explains that the Brahms "is not going to be funny at all, nor is it supposed to be funny" but that "all humor doesn't necessarily have to be funny" because "there's such a thing as plain good humor which means simply being in a good mood."<sup>10</sup> Bernstein's sole reference to humor as 'temperament' rather than something 'funny' is in relation to the Brahms, which is not discussed or performed until the last seven minutes of the hour-long lecture. This surprising rhetorical turn seems to imply disdain for the whole topic of humor in music. Even though the lecture is entirely devoted to humor in music, Bernstein feels compelled, after sinking all involved "about as low as [they] can go in musical

humor," to "pull [everyone] up again, and finish by playing a piece of great symphonic humor."<sup>11</sup> Especially considering the positioning of this illustration of "good humor" to conclude the lecture on what everyone thought was about something else, Bernstein seems to make the point that there is a place for humor in music, but that it is not in the masterworks with which we should be primarily occupied.

Whatever Bernstein's particular hang-ups about humor and KhagarBalugrak's specific objection to *Joan*, certain aspects of humor seem to be at odds with the Western Classical Music Tradition. This vague inappropriateness of humor, wrapped up in and related to the expectations of and obligations to fit a certain profile of what it means to be great music, reveals a preoccupation with music and musical performance that is not normally a priority: the preoccupation with bodies. For example, in a peculiarly self-conscious way, we may be concerned that an audience may not get the humor or else might be offended by it, or we may be unsure if it is acceptable to laugh or if doing so will be disruptive or seem uncultured. While navigating humor by assessing or predicting the effect on other people, our focus is drawn to the social vs individual and the present vs the timeless. In this way, the performance becomes not about abstract goals of truth or beauty, but about connecting with people in a straightforward, fundamentally physical way. Rather than these disembodied abstract concepts, *Joan* forces our attention on the normal, mundane, and embodied task of phone tag.

Approached from this binary perspective of metaphysical/physical, the vague discomfort of humor in music simultaneously makes sense and begins to seem problematic. After all, what is music, and performance in particular, if not a unique experience in time, necessarily physically bound and defined? Does it not make sense to acknowledge and attend to the bodies present, which seek both the metaphysical, as well as other physical bodies and all the lived, occasionally mundane, experiences that come with them? Especially in this moment where we are socially-distanced and aware of the absence of others' bodies in our day-to-day lives as well as performance schedules: the importance of individuals' physically present bodies certainly emerges as an overlooked privilege.

Humor, especially humor that evokes the everyday and quotidian, is as legitimate a subject for music as those

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abstract ones that can only be grasped cerebrally. The fact that the experience of humor is instead marginalized suggests an underlying ideology of concert programming that intentionally celebrates a very specific and limited range of experiences, which, in turn, celebrates a very specific and limited set of priorities and ideals. These strategic celebrations ultimately culminate in a confirmation of a certain kind of identity characterized by valuing the mind over the body, and the eternal over the present moment.

There is nothing wrong with valuing and seeking out experiences that reward contact with the cerebral and 'serious', and certainly prolonged meditations therein yield great aesthetic experiences. But the disdain of humor and that which is shared between bodies seems designed to perpetuate a limited, and therefore false, sense of what is of value in the human experience.

Neubauer's piece is a small offering toward a more stylistically diverse Western classical music repertoire that is representative of a broader range of experiences. Especially at this moment, I encourage you to consider humorous music as part of your online recital programming. Consider it an opportunity to offer your audience a reminder of our embodiment that we are all otherwise so sorely missing.

*Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy* is unpublished. You can contact the composer through his website, [www.paulneubauer.com](http://www.paulneubauer.com).

*Dr. Joelle Arnhold is a violist, teacher, and co-creator of the music ensemble collaboration app Cyborg Llama. She has appeared as lecture-recitalist at the 2018 AVS and will return in 2021 as an emerging artist recitalist. Her recording of Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy is available on her website, [www.joellearnhold.com](http://www.joellearnhold.com).*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Neubauer, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephanie Gaskell. "Mr. Softee Pledges Cones of Silence." *New York Post*, January 27, 2005. August 11, 2018. <https://nypost.com/2005/01/27/mr-softee-pledges-cones-of-silence/>
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Neubauer, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2018.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Hugh Sung. "Peter Schickele, Composer and P.D.Q. Bach Specialist". Filmed [July 2016]. YouTube Video, 52:44. Posted [July 2016]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_qrgiPISGM&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_qrgiPISGM&t=6s).
- <sup>6</sup> KhagarBalugrak disliked the piece so much, they commented three times. The comment quoted here is the final of the three.
- <sup>7</sup> KhagarBalugrak. (ca. 2010). Re: *Joan, Your Phone is Always Busy* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwbgJ81Gr8U>
- <sup>8</sup> Artful Learning, "Leonard Bernstein: Young People's Concerts Humor in Music (Part 4 of 4)". Filmed [February 1959]. YouTube video, 14:51. Posted [May 2011]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkj7a9Fw2Rg>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.