The sound that sells: the musical and improvisatory practices of the American auctioneer

Nicole Edwards Malley

University of Iowa

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THE SOUND THAT SELLS: THE MUSICAL AND IMPROVISATORY
PRACTICES OF THE AMERICAN AUCTIONEER

by

Nicole Edwards Malley

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Music in
the Graduate College of
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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Marian Wilson Kimber
The American auctioneer is an improvising musician whose practice both directs and is shaped by the actions of the bidding audience in a participatory musical performance. The rapid, often unintelligible chant of the auctioneer represents a sophisticated set of musical skills employed for the purpose of economic transaction. This dissertation examines the musical and improvisatory practices of the auction chant, or bid-call, through analysis of pitch, melodic structures, rhythm, and meter as functions of an oral formulaic and creative process. The study draws upon ethnographic, archival, linguistic, and cultural studies in order to assess the extent to which discrete musical characteristics of the chant serve the socio-economic purposes of the auction.

Auctioneers’ embedded musical and linguistic patterns are acquired through a practice-based pedagogical method and are treated flexibly such that the chant remains unpredictable and exciting to the listener. While the monotone chant serves as the foundation of the bid-call, auxiliary pitches (most often pentatonic or major scale subsets) offer melodic variety and function in a fulcrum relationship to the “hum.” Likewise, auctioneers establish a “referential” meter wherein a single metrical organization of the pulse returns repeatedly, alternating with expansions or contractions of that fundamental meter. Listeners are entrained to expect musical consistency, but through disruptions of familiar musical patterns, the auctioneer focuses bidder attention on the chant rather than the realities of the economic transaction in progress. Ethnographic research with auctioneers throughout the United States and archival recordings of live auctions dating back to the 1940s reveal that many characteristics of chant practice are shared among auctioneers; however, stylistic practices vary based on sales type (livestock, real estate, agricultural equipment, estate, etc.). In all auction types, the bid-call offers a heightened emotional
experience for the attendees and an opportunity for audience participation and musical agency.

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To Cory, Terry, Susan, Rachael, Tom, Eliot, and Bob
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The transcriptions contained herein are not performance scores, but are offered as analytical models. As such, dynamics and breath marks are not indicated. All chant transcriptions are notated an octave above chant pitch to facilitate consistency between transcriptions and in order to avoid the need for grand staff notation in some chants. Key signatures represent the diatonic pitch collection within which the auctioneer’s pitch collection exists, although key signature does not indicate functional tonality or its harmonic implications.
CHAPTER 1

“IT’S AUCTION DAY!”: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF AUCTIONEERING AS MUSIC

In a church basement in rural Illinois, a family watches as a room full of farmers and investors, strangers and life-long friends, compete for the land that their father owned and worked throughout his life. I sit next to a local farmer who is attending the sale with no intention of bidding or buying, but rather to assess the current value of land comparable to his own. In front of me, a large balding man in too-tight overalls and a threadbare t-shirt lifts a piece of paper with a bidder number on it. In doing so, he offers a little over $150,000 for the piece of land on sale. A man dressed in starched, pressed dark blue jeans and a crisp maroon button-down shirt paces back and forth just outside the church’s side door in clear view of the group gathered within. He is talking to the recently-widowed woman who is selling the land, updating her on the most recent bid placed, asking her if she is comfortable letting the property go for this amount or if she needs more in order to approve the sale. Toward the back of the room sits the man who has rented and farmed the land since the owner retired ten years ago. He is in no financial condition to purchase the land he farms, but he waits and watches to see who will take over ownership of the land. It will be up to the new owner to decide whether he can still rent and farm the ground. His job and livelihood are at stake in a sale he can only watch from the sidelines.
Now, finished with the phone call to the owner, the man in the maroon shirt reappears and restarts the sale, singing a brief melodic phrase and launching into nearly indecipherable chant.

In Lexington, Kentucky, another sale is underway, directed by the chanting of a distinguished-looking gentleman in a sport coat and slacks, seated between two men dressed in the same attire. Hundreds of horses are being groomed in the stables behind the theater here at the Keeneland auction house and race facility, accompanied by trainers, handlers, owners, and privately retained veterinarians. In the parking lot, my six year-old Hyundai Santa Fe looks a little sad parked between a Jaguar and a Mercedes Benz. In the stalls behind the sales arena, buyers in polo shirts, pressed khakis, and loafers amble through the lanes, watching the horses prepare for their three minutes in the limelight. On break, representatives for Saudi buyers choose between sushi and the famed Kentucky burgoo soup from the lavish assortment of dining options in the auction compound’s restaurant. In a back room at the auction house, eight veterinarians sit at flat-screen computer monitors reviewing x-rays of the horses for sale, assessing the yearlings—babies, really—for their potential as racehorses. Detailed digital imagery of bone structure and alignment predict and perhaps determine the story that will be the animal’s life. Will he race? Will he breed? Will he bring over a million dollars in the sales ring later that afternoon? In the sales arena, the auction house’s first and only female handler in its seventy-five year history is dressed in a dark green Keeneland sport coat and slacks and leads
a jumpy horse carefully to the middle of the stage. The woman is dwarfed by the muscular young horse, but she is clearly the one in control. She whispers to the horse and exerts an assured, slow confidence that creates an immediate bond between her and the animal. Meanwhile, an unknown buyer places a bid of $250,000 over the phone. Seconds later, an audience member gently lifts his right hand and nods his head, indicating that he is willing to pay $260,000 for the horse. After the sale, and before the entrance of the next horse, a Keeneland staff member hurries on stage to scoop up the droppings left by the previous horse. The stage is immaculate and bears no trace of the hundreds of animals that have traveled across it over the course of four days.

On a Saturday in late July, a farm field in Sorento, Illinois, is filled with men, women, children, tractors, and flatbeds piled high with tools, equipment, and miscellaneous farm items. Intricate rhythmic patterns spill out of a loudspeaker as a man calls out from the back of a pick-up truck. By noon, the temperature reaches ninety-three degrees with eighty-five percent humidity, no breeze, a heat index of one hundred and seven degrees, and not a single cloud in the sky. Men huddle on the shady side of a large tractor to catch even the slightest relief from the oppressive heat. Mothers and daughters from a local church group cook bratwurst sandwiches and rearrange pieces of homemade cake and pie inside one of the barns on the property. The stagnant air inside the barn smells sweet, spicy, and smoky, but the heat has pushed food far from my mind. Outside, dozens of antique tractors sit in stately, quiet beauty, arranged in
perfect angled lines like a marching band seconds before the start of a half-time show. These tractors are the main attraction and will sell later in the afternoon. During the relative cool of the morning, a group of men and some women congregate in a loose semi-circle in front of a pick-up truck where a man holds up a metal machine part for bidders to examine. Over the course of the morning, this man will show the audience items ranging from a table saw to a pile of scrap metal. At one point, I am convinced that he is showing the audience a wooden stick with duct tape wrapped around one end, but that may be a heat-inspired illusion. As mid-day approaches, the sun moves ever closer to a position directly above the field. As the sun’s angle to the buildings and tractors disappears, shaded areas shrink and groups of thirty or more people contort themselves to fit into the two feet of shade left next to one of the farm’s largest buildings in search of the one remaining cool spot on the farm.

At each of these vastly contrasting events, a common language of song can be heard. It is a song that both accompanies and facilitates the activities of the participants, a song that both unites and incites those present. From the blue-blooded traditions of the Keeneland horse auction to the dragonfly-infested fields of southern Illinois, an auctioneer is at work singing and selling. Performing a rapid-fire chant, rich with rhythm and melody, and mysterious in its apparent incomprehensibility, the auctioneer turns the sale of a house, a farm, a car, a horse, a bowl, or a stick with duct tape into a communal musical event with immediate economic implications for those present.
Auction Music: A Project Overview

The auctioneer is an improvising musician who employs specific musical techniques in order to direct the sale of items at the highest possible price and to effect the transfer of goods and capital between buyers and sellers. The improvisational strategies of the auctioneer result in a musical performance that creates community within a participatory performance environment, resulting in a transformational ritual of exchange. Described in a Lucky Strike Cigarette radio advertisement as “the weirdest sound in American business,”¹ the chant of the auctioneer has served as a foundation of the American economy since the Civil War, if not before, but the musical, improvisatory talents of its practitioners have been too long hidden. This study reveals the structures and strategies, the mechanics and the magic of these singing salespeople.

A musicological study of auctioneering as improvised practice has thus far not been attempted in American scholarship. While this fact alone may provide one of the strongest arguments for undertaking a project on the subject, the proposition is, indeed, a controversial one. Many auctioneers themselves do

¹ Lucky Strike radio advertisement, date unknown. The quote describes the chant style of tobacco auctioneer L.A. “Speed” Riggs, who was featured in radio advertisements by the Lucky Strike Cigarette Company from 1938 to 1969. The advertisement recording from which this quote is taken exists in the recording archives of the National Auctioneers Association headquarters. Based on the dates of the recordings held in the archives, it is unlikely that this radio ad predates the mid 1940s, though it could date as late as the mid 1960s.
not view the practice as musical. We do not shop at the local record store or on iTunes for auctioneering CDs, nor do we see staged performances of auctioneering chant scheduled at our local music venues. Attend an auction, though, and you will see heads bobbing and toes tapping. The music of the auction challenges notions of the concept of music, but in so doing, provides an opportunity to examine the intersection of musical style, social structure, improvisatory strategy, and transactional ritual.

In 2008 (the most recent year surveyed by the National Auctioneers Association), $268.5 billion in sales were conducted through the live auction method, making the profession of auctioneering a significant component of the American economic landscape. Included in this figure are auctions of all types,

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2 Geoffrey Miller, in his study of East Coast American antique auctions, also recognizes that auctioneers do not normally self-identify as musicians: “The question of whether to consider the auction chant more closely related to speech or song is problematic, for auctioneers...seem to have little or no conscious conception of their ‘performances’ as music. Yet, they are invariably intrigued by the suggestion and appear comfortable discussing the ‘musicality’ of their work.” Geoffrey Miller, “‘Are You All Unhappy at a Twenty Dollar Bill?’: Text, Tune and Context at Antique Auctions,” *Ethnomusicology* 28 (1984): 187. I have found a similar reaction in my fieldwork and interviews with auctioneers, though many suggest that they have long maintained an interest in the connections between music and auctioneering.

and indeed, almost anything imaginable can be and has been sold through the
live auction method. The National Auctioneers Association groups auction types
into the following categories (with total 2008 sales per category):

1. Agricultural machinery and equipment ($18.5 billion)
2. Art, antiques, and collectibles ($12.4 billion)
3. Automotive ($83.1 billion)
4. Charity ($16.3 billion)
5. Commercial and industrial machinery and equipment ($12.7 billion)
6. Commercial and industrial real estate ($15.5 billion)
7. Intellectual property ($0.2 billion)
8. Land and agricultural real estate ($26 billion)
9. Livestock ($17.2 billion)
10. Personal property ($9.2 billion)
11. Residential real estate ($17.1 billion)4

In the world today, there are myriad ways in which to sell or buy any of
these types of items. From wholesale to retail, through brokers and dealers,
internet sales, catalog sales, door-to-door sales, swap meets, garage sales, and co-
ops, an item can change hands through economic transaction in a variety of
forms. Something quite special happens in a live auction, however, which
differentiates it from all of the aforementioned sales and purchase methods. At a
live auction, the sale of an item is mediated, indeed, enacted through a musical
performance provided by a skilled soloist-cum-salesman.

4 Of comparison, the music industry reported a total of 428 million units sold
during 2008 (including both cd/album sales and music downloads) and the
music concert industry reported $4.2 billion in sales (information acquired from:
/music/01indu.html).

4 Ibid.
The live auction in American culture is a method of economic transaction reliant upon a specialized performance practice that is highly musical yet not generally considered music. This is not to say that auctioneering cannot be appreciated on an aesthetic level, but that its primary creative force is not one that neatly fits into Western European models of musical purpose and aesthetic value. Ethnomusicological studies have long examined similar examples of practices characterized by their “functional integration” of music and cultural activity including those with hybrid speech/song characteristics—from stylized intonations and recitations of the Qur’an and West African field chants to the work songs and vendors’ cries of the African-American South. John Miller Chernoff’s study of African musical systems identifies functional integration as one of the hallmarks of a diverse group of styles across the continent, noting, “African music is not set apart from its social and cultural contexts.”

Though Chernoff’s depiction of Western aesthetics as one of artistic separation from daily life oversimplifies the nature of the West’s musical activities and culture, it is nonetheless true that high degrees of functional integration are often considered primarily non-Western. However, the practice of auctioneering stands as an example of extreme functional integration within American culture.

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Furthermore, auctioneering, through its highly stylized and rhythmically complex chant or “calling” processes, represents a sophisticated improvisatory musical practice that has received almost no critical scholarly attention within the fields of musicology or ethnomusicology. Scholarship about improvisation is currently in an exciting period, questioning the historically exclusive categories of Western classical tradition and non-Western practice, and art and popular musical styles. It is within this burgeoning field of scholarship that I situate my study of the American auction chant.

Nonetheless, auctioneering is a distinctive practice when we consider the creation of the musical event. Auctions are separated from daily life by specific and reserved locations. The auctioneer is a professional who is understood by the audience to have a specific performative role in the event. At the same time, an auction is primarily a commercial event—an economic interaction and not a concert entertainment. Indeed, it is this very ambiguity about the practice that suggests its richness as a musicological subject, or as George Burrows states, “the point of genres such as Sprechgesang and rapping—and their fascination for the analyst—lies precisely in their accommodation of contrasting tendencies.”

Only one published musicological source addresses auctioneering as its subject: Geoffrey Miller’s 1984 article, entitled “Are You All Unhappy at a Twenty Dollar Bill?: Text, Tune and Context at Antique Auctions.” Miller’s

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primary goal in the study is to describe exactly what aspects of auctioneering are musical through the analysis of transcribed auction chants (specifically, auction chants from American east coast antique auctions). Borrowing from and expanding upon George List's speech-to-song study, Miller examines pitch stability and scalar structure in the auction chant. To a more limited extent, he also discusses rhythmic patterns and some improvisational components—specifically, the use of “filler words”—a common practice whereby the auctioneer interjects words or phrases to add variety or otherwise heighten the intensity and pace of the auction chant.

Miller acknowledges that most auctioneers do not self-associate as musical performers, but are comfortable talking about the practice in terms of music. Indeed, we may find parallels in a wide variety of non-Western musics such as those mentioned above (Qur’an recitation and West African harvest chant in particular), wherein practitioners do not categorize their work as musical in the Western aesthetic sense. Regardless, many of these practices have been widely accepted as legitimate musicological subjects. Members of a community or culture generally know what is and is not music within their own culture. However, Johan Fornäs reminds us that these designations are often contradictory—what is considered speech in one culture would be considered song in another.7 George List refers to just such a case in his discussion of song.

declamation, and speech in Native American Hopi culture, wherein a special sort of speech-song tradition called “announcing” exists between the two points of the speech-to-song continuum.\(^8\) Though indiscernible to an outside listener, the two styles serve clearly separate functions for the members of the community and are, thus, classified as distinct practices.

In the field of linguistics and communication, Koenraad Kuiper has conducted the most research on auctioneering. *Smooth Talkers: The Linguistic Performance of Auctioneers and Sportscasters*, examines the relationship between discourse structures and formulaic interjections within a spectrum of auctioneering types. Discourse structures in auctioneering occur when, “the auctioneer creates the verbal framework within which external events, such as the holding of a lot at an antique auction, take place.”\(^9\) In his analyses, auction discourse structures all possess the same basic characteristics and can be best understood as an internalized flow-chart directing the auctioneer through the various stages of the sale process. Though discourse structures vary slightly between types of auctions, the basic structure proposed by Kuiper is:

1. Description of the lot
2. Opening bid search
3. Bid-calling
4. Bid locator

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5. Interpolations
6. Bid closing

Moving through the steps above, the auctioneer flows seamlessly through the points of the discourse structure, facilitated by the use of formulaic speech patterns, interpolations, and filler words employed within and between each step.

Through observation, recording, and transcription of numerous auctions, Kuiper identified three distinct types of auction scenarios, characterized by the speed at which one individual item (or lot) is sold. In auctions with a high rate of sale, the entire sale, and thus, the entire discourse structure, may occur in less than sixty seconds. Examples of such high rates of sale occur in southern U.S. tobacco auctions and New Zealand wool auctions, while auctions with the slowest rates of sale occur at high-end auctions in antique and fine art auction houses such as Sotheby’s of London. Medium rates of sale occur at local antique auctions with items of smaller value than those sold at fine art houses and at livestock auctions. Kuiper posits that the rate of sale corresponds to specific linguistic pressures for the auctioneer. At a low-pressure auction employing a slow rate of sale, speech is less stylized than in the middle and high-pressure examples. Little patterned or formulaic speech occurs, and the performance of the sale is primarily conducted in normal speech patterns. In the high-pressure cases, Kuiper notes a marked lack of filler words or formulaic interjections.
When the rate of sale is so fast, little more than the numbers are communicated, albeit at a very high rate of speed.

Because there is such a distinct musical difference between formant area pitch suggestion in low-pressure auctioneering and sung pitch in medium and high-pressure auctioneering, this dissertation will focus only on what Kuiper calls medium and high-pressure auctioneering to examine, in detail, the musical practices that characterize these types of performances. Kuiper’s focus is not musical, and as such, he underplays one of the most significant components of auctioneering to be examined in my research. He does not make it clear that in both the medium and high-pressure auction cases, the text is largely, if not entirely sung or chanted. Kuiper acknowledges that medium and high-pressure auctioneering exhibits an increasingly limited pitch variety as the pressure increases, but does not clarify that the pitch variety in low-pressure cases is not sung but is only suggested by normal speech contour. In the medium and high-pressure cases, the pitch collection, though limited, exhibits a distinctly musical performance and pitch stability distinct from the low-pressure cases.

Kuiper’s examination of medium-pressure sales is currently the most in-depth account of formulaic interpolations and filler words. Kuiper provides lists of filler phrases and words as examples of formulaic speech but discusses these filler phrases primarily for their effectiveness in navigating the general discourse structure of the auction. To a limited degree, he explores the manner in which a “dictionary of formulaic speech” varies from auctioneer to auctioneer but does
not extend this discussion into the realm of style or the process of improvisation. It is exactly these issues of style and improvisation that interest me, and, in combination with a close examination of pitch collections, rhythmic and metric structures, melodic contour and cadence figures, I will explore the ways in which musical style is performed through the improvisatory use of formulaic patterns and improvisatory strategy.

Beyond the scholarship of Miller and Kuiper, there is surprisingly little direct engagement with the structure(s) of auction chant in academic sources. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on the history of auctions and economic theories of the auction method, consideration of the bid-call and its role in the social and economic dynamics of the auction are scant at best. The majority of economic studies on the subject of auctioneering do not consider bid-calling practice, focusing instead on the dynamics of the sale in terms of pricing and bidding strategies and the effects of individual buying communities on competition and value construction. One important exception is Charles Smith’s *Auctions: The Social Construction of Value*, in which economic models of the live auction are generated through a nuanced examination of social, interpersonal, and communal dynamics at play in the auction setting. While Smith does not attempt an analysis of actual chants, he does consider the chant’s function and its ramifications in regard to bidding strategies and value results. Smith adopts a dramaturgical perspective on the performance of the auctioneer:
To characterize auctions as ‘reality’-generating processes is to restate the thesis that auctions are primarily processes for dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty by generating socially legitimated definitions of goods. Performances are similar ‘reality’ generating processes. The power of both the theater and the auction arise from the fact that people depend on such social enterprises to give order and definition to activities that would otherwise be seen as inchoate and meaningless. The show must go on because to interrupt the show is to allow the reality and meanings that are dependent for their very existence on the show’s performance to crumble.¹⁰

Smith’s discussion of the auction as a socially transformative experience facilitated by the performing auctioneer poses provocative questions about the ways in which the music of the auction chant mediates, amplifies, and negotiates the ambiguities which the auction must resolve.

In addition to the economic structures of auctioneering, the history of auctioneering is addressed in a number of texts, but surprisingly, in otherwise comprehensive treatments of the auction method, the chant of the auctioneer receives little to no attention. Those authors who do touch on the linguistic and musical characteristics of the auction chant do so briefly at best. Brian Learmount’s A History of the Auction provides the most thorough account of the history of auctions from ancient Greece through the present day, presenting the history of live auctions through source readings and archival financial documentation, primarily from England and the United States.¹¹ While the


auctioneer’s “cry” is mentioned in some of Learmount’s source readings, he does not treat the subject at all, providing no evidence of the rise of the auction chant as a sales method, or its varieties, styles, and purposes in modern auctioneering. Ralph Cassady’s *Auctions and Auctioneering* explores the auction method, common practices of the auctioneer, and the economic structures underpinning different types of auctions, and includes an entire chapter on bid-calling.\(^{12}\)

Cassady’s assessment of the bid-call is primarily a pragmatic one:

> It is utilized in auction selling in certain fields for a number of reasons. Most important, chanting makes less obvious the sometimes long, quiet intervals between bids, thus obscuring the fact that the bidding is anything but lively. Moreover, the rhythm of a chant, delivered in a monotone or very nearly so, may intrigue, and thus hold the attention of, an audience. The chant is also considered a voice saver by those employing it, for, as in singing, the sounds come largely from the diaphragm, thus easing the strain on the vocal cords. The inherent fascination of a rhythmic beat, combined with the personality of the auctioneer, may bring into the bidding listeners who lack a fundamental interest in the item up for sale.\(^{13}\)

Cassady’s treatment of the bid-call is neither linguistic nor musical in its approach, but rather examines auction chant in respect to its practical function as a sales technique. His inherently problematic use of the terms “monotone” and “rhythmic” represents a common theme in the few written sources on bid-calling, and these nebulous and often mis-applied terms appear again and again in auctioneers’ own accounts and descriptions of the auction chant. In chapters

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 117-8.
2, 3, and 4, I will examine the ways in which these words are employed by practitioners and non-musicians as descriptive terms. Suffice it to say that neither term provides particularly specific information about the nature of pitch, melody, or rhythm in the auction chant; they do, however, suggest the primacy of these elements as structural, expressive, and effective devices in the chant. Cassady’s study, though musically unspecific, does provide some of the most comprehensive accounts of the purposes and types of filler words used in specific auction types such as tobacco and livestock auctions.

Autobiographical works such as George Bean’s *Yankee Auctioneer*, self-published instructional guides such as Philip Engelmeier’s *Auctioneering: A Complete Treatise on How to Become an Auctioneer*, and anecdotal works such as journalist Robert Lentz’s *Ultimate Secrets of the Country Auction: A Storyteller’s Profound Exposé of America’s Most Mysterious Marketplace* provide colorful stories about the people and events surrounding auction day, but surprisingly offer little to no information about the bid-call itself. Both Bean and Lentz describe minute details of prices, bidding wars, contested sales, and personalities in conflict at

14 George Bean, *Yankee Auctioneer: Wherein are to be Found the Reminiscences and Philosophy of a County Auctioneer* (Boston: Little Brown, 1948).


decades of auctions, making the discussion of the bid-call conspicuous in its absence. Likewise, a series of ethnographic doctoral dissertations in the 1970s and 1980s are utterly silent when it comes to the auction chant itself. When “comprehensive” instructional, historical, and ethnographic studies leave out such a fundamental component of the auction process, arguably, the single attribute distinguishing it from all other types of economic transactions, we cannot help but wonder why. Is it, perhaps, the very hybrid nature of the auction chant that makes it a daunting analytical subject? Has bid-calling, slipped through the cracks in research because it has no clear parallel or compatible practices, and thus, “belongs” clearly to no single scholarly discipline? Do auctioneers themselves have a vested interest in maintaining a certain level of secrecy and mystery about the nature of the auction chant? Does auctioneering resist textual explication due to its transmission through oral traditions? While the answers are unclear, and some promise to remain so, the lacuna is compelling.

Thinking About Auctioneering: Methodology and Approaches

In order to analyze the dynamic relationship between improvisation, musical structure, social interaction, community, commerce, and meaning through the performance of auction chant, this study is guided by a few foundational and over-arching questions:

1) What are the musical characteristics of the auction chant, and what types of improvisatory strategies are employed by the auctioneer during the performance of the auction chant?

2) What are the pedagogical methods used to teach bid-calling?

3) What special function(s) does music serve in the economic exchange of the auction, and how does the socio-economic structure of the sale determine the musical structure of the auction chant?

Because the literature on auctioneering is slight, to answer these questions, I have taken theoretical and methodological cues from a number of interrelated fields: cultural studies, sociology, psychology, music theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology—specifically, scholarship on musical improvisation. In particular, a few scholars have profoundly influenced my thinking about, and approaches to the auction as improvised musical event.

Richard Bauman’s *Verbal Art as Performance* has informed a great deal of my thinking about the aesthetic and social qualities of auctioneering. Bauman
suggests that a variety of verbal performances can be understood as artistic to varying degrees because they transcend literal communication:

In other words, in artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.’ This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.18

Bauman’s concept of the interpretive frame provides a useful model for the understanding of the art of auctioneering, for it is through the art of the auction chant that emotions are excited and bidding behaviors are affected in the process of the sale. The auctioneer’s performance provides an interpretive frame for the bidding audience in which much more than mere bid increments are communicated. Bauman argues that verbal performances are “keyed,” providing specific cues that distinguish verbal art as performance from normal speech. Through such devices as special codes, special language, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, and special formulae, the verbal artist communicates additional information beyond the literal spoken text and engages the audience’s emotions for specific social purposes through his performance.19


19 Ibid., 18-21.
Bauman further considers the special circumstances of improvised verbal art as an emergent performance practice. For Bauman, the qualities of verbal art consist of, “the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations,” and “the emergent structure of performance events is of special interest under conditions of change, as participants adapt established patterns of performance to new circumstances.”

Existing on a continuum between “completely novel” and “completely fixed” texts, verbal artists such as auctioneers employ a host of stylized, patterned, and repetitive structures through which social groups and their members can experience a specific type of transformation:

There is, however, a distinctive potential in performance by its very nature which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance. It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication.

The enhancement of experience in a live auction results from the specialized musical practice of bid-calling and its capacity to unite the audience in a coordinated social activity. The nature and quality of social change in the

\[20\] Ibid., 38.

\[21\] Ibid., 42.

\[22\] Ibid., 43-4.
auction setting will be addressed in chapter 7, with special attention paid to the ways in which the bid-call itself facilitates complex socio-economic transformations.

Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory has further shaped my analysis of the dynamic relationships between power structures, communities, identity, and social structures within the performance of the auction chant. Bourdieu’s theory examines culturally-constructed behaviors that are born of, expressive of, and potentially transformative for social groups. For Bourdieu, such behaviors constitute “habitus,” defined as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.23

Bourdieu, being intentionally circuitous in his definition here, suggests that habitus practices are those socially generated behaviors that observe fixed yet fluid structures—structures that, themselves are often unconsciously employed by the practitioners in the emergent act of performance. The structuring principles that produce the habitus reflect, legitimate, and transform social hierarchies and structures through improvisation by redefining and re-

positioning members of a group within the pre-existing structural categories. Crucial to understanding Bourdieu’s theory is the emphasis on practice—practical knowledge and performance itself. The structures to which he refers are not Platonic ideals, existing in some abstract meta-reality to which people appeal through socially significant acts. Rather, the structures of a social group are created through the practice, performance, and employment of specific behaviors, and these behaviors, or habitus, have the power to both represent and alter the structures from which they arise. As such, Bourdieu’s theory has informed my approach to the understanding of auctioneering as a socially generated and aesthetically meaningful set of practices.

Additionally, practice theory has been exceptionally useful in my examination of the pedagogical methods of auctioneering instruction and the acquisition of bid-calling skills. Because auctioneering is learned by doing—that is to say, through practice and repetition, rather than through the academic study of theoretical models or notated scores—it represents an embedded set of skills acquired through an instructional process of repetition and slight variation. Eventually, structuring principles are internalized by the developing auctioneer and ultimately, the auctioneer finds and hones her personal style as a mixture of faithfully reproduced patterns with improvisatory modifications and variations on those established patterns.

Ingrid Monson’s recent studies of improvisational practices in Zimbabwe, American popular culture, and jazz offer exciting applications of Bourdieu’s
theories and provide useful examples of the ways in which Bourdieu’s theories can play into a discussion of auctioneering by examining “the ways social and musical practices weave interconnections between the more disembodied domains of discourse and structure.” 24 While Monson’s concept of discourse is broader than Kuiper’s, auctioneering provides a special case for consideration. Accordingly, I investigate the ways in which the practice of auctioneering does indeed “shape how people think about the world at a particular moment,” not necessarily through discursive argument, but with discourse structures that change the socio-economic conditions of members of the bidding audience through the performance of auctioneering chant. Indeed, the transformative power managed by the auctioneer changes the very identities of auction participants. The practice of auctioneering converts a participant from a face in the crowd to a new owner and allows members of a community to display and possibly change their economic status.

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24 Ingrid Monson, “Jazz as Political and Musical Practice,” in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 23. By discourse, Monson means “ideas, expressed most typically in language, that are deployed in the process of framing arguments and justifying positions, and that possess the authority and prestige to shape how people think about the world at a particular moment,” and by structure, “the social categories, laws, and economic systems that define the terms of social experience for large groups of people.” Koenraad Kuiper develops a slightly different model of discourse structures that will be examined more fully in chapter 2.
Because the conditions of each auction sale are different, the auctioneer must employ a variety of improvisational tactics to navigate the ever-changing sale environment. Improvisational issues will be addressed through the analysis of my ethnographic data in dialogue with the work of Edward Hall and Bruce Benson, whose studies of the acquisition of improvisational tools and improvised dialogue will have direct bearing on my analysis of the learning processes involved in developing proficiency in auction chant. Patricia Campbell’s study of pedagogical strategies for the instruction of improvisation suggests that similar approaches to the employment of formulae recur amongst a variety of improvisational practices— from Persian radif to Vietnamese traditional musics— providing substantial tools with which to situate the instruction of auctioneering in the spectrum of improvisation education.

Lastly, scholarship from the fields of psychology and jazz studies provide useful interpretive models for approaching some of the more esoteric issues raised by auctioneering chant. In particular, I will examine the special emotional and psychological state into which many auctioneers enter during the practice of


the auction chant. This state has been described as “fluid,” “rolling,” “in the zone,” and “flow” by various auctioneer informants. Both Geoffrey Miller’s and my own auctioneer informants refer to the auction-specific term “rolling,” which Miller defines as “a forward momentum controlled by phrase length and length of pauses between phrases.”27 One of Miller’s auctioneer informants is quoted as saying:

It’s all kind of automatic. The computer in my brain starts to work. It’s like you — somebody saying to you, ‘I want to play the guitar’ or whatever instrument — the computers in your brain work. You don’t tell your fingers ‘now you do this and that.’ It just begins to work and all of a sudden everything flows out of that musical instrument you are playing.28

Through models developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his study of the “flow” state, I will explore the ways in which the embodied, highly technical practice of auctioneering becomes both an automatic performative skill, and a conduit for the attainment of a special emotional and mental state.29

It is not my intention to “prove” the musicality of auctioneering. While the following study will examine many of the musical elements employed by the auctioneer in practice, I make no attempt to show that auctioneers’ chants fulfill a certain number or quality of musical parameters such that they should be

27 Miller, 198.

28 Cal Smith, quoted in Miller, 203.

understood and evaluated in the same ways that scholars and listeners approach other styles of music. Rather, I have attempted to meet auctioneering on its own terms. As a jazz percussionist, I have undoubtedly approached the practice of auctioneering with an eye to and an ear for issues of improvisation and musical expression, and to be sure, it was these very issues that drew me to the subject to begin with. As the following pages will show, auctioneers employ a host of musical techniques in the performance of auction chant, and part of my task will be to provide description, transcription, and analyses of those specific characteristics that remove auction chant from the realm of daily speech and place it somewhere in the musical world. At the same time, auctioneering employs a variety of non-musical or extra-musical strategies to facilitate the sale of items, and it is the interplay between the musical and extra-musical, song and speech, art and commerce, and style and function that makes auctioneering a rich case study in musical performance.

Notation illuminates only one corner of the dynamic practice of auctioneering. The performance of auctioneering is an ever-shifting, embodied improvisatory practice that utilizes specific melodic, rhythmic, metric, and phrasing structures in an ongoing unfolding process. The auctioneer, as improviser, must make musical and expressive choices in the act of performance, and the strategies employed by the auctioneer to navigate the interpersonal dynamics of an ongoing sale are the structuring principles by which the unscripted performance gains its efficacy, excitement, and power. The following
study, then, will examine these improvisatory choices and their ramifications on the music of the chant and the progress and success of the sale.

In order to examine auctioneering with these concerns in mind, my research methods have been of three main types: ethnographic, archival, and critical. Studying a current improvisatory musical system affords a scholar the opportunity—and, indeed requires her—to witness, experience, and engage with the live musical performance and its performers. Ethnographic data, as such, plays a significant role in my research. When embarking on the project, I first sought to attain a level of bi-musicality by undertaking professional auctioneering training at World Wide College of Auctioneering in Mason City, Iowa. Following my training in bid-calling, I conducted five months of ethnographic data collection involving the observation and recording of live auction chants from a variety of auctions throughout the country. During and after these ethnographic trips, I conducted a series of interviews with practicing auctioneers.

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30 The term bi-musicality was introduced by ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood in “The Challenge of Bi-Musicality,” *Ethnomusicology* 4 (1960): 55-59. Hood argues that the academic study of a musical practice should be accompanied by the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the performance of that music such that the scholar better understands not only the techniques and styles of the music, but also the aural skills necessary to engage the music with a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetics of the practitioners themselves.

31 Throughout this text, bid-calling and auction chant will be used interchangeably. Auctioneers use both terms to describe their performance practice.
and retired auctioneers from a variety of sub-fields within the auction profession.

My fieldwork and interview materials have been greatly supplemented by my archival work at the National Auctioneers Association archives at the association’s national headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri. There, I was given access to over one hundred hours of archival and video recordings of live auction chants. The NAA archives contain auction recordings from around the United States, from the 1940s to present day. These recordings have been particularly invaluable in my research into livestock and tobacco auctions—the two types of auctions most commonly found in the archive’s collection. The archives also contain a large collection of pamphlets and study books issued by auction schools throughout the country as well as home-study instructional manuals, and instructional books and pamphlets published by individual auctioneers. Though the collection is not comprehensive and represents materials from only a fraction of the country’s auction schools, it does provide an important record of the ways in which practitioners themselves understand the nature, structure, and characteristics of the auction chant. Additionally, these materials provide some historical documentation of pedagogical procedures and practices from the 1930s through present day.
Both my own field recordings and those acquired at the NAA archives have been used as the basis for the transcriptions presented throughout this project. Musical transcription and analysis, and consideration of both auction-specific literature and interdisciplinary studies shape my approaches to the critical appraisal of the auction chant. Chapter 2 will provide a description of the fundamental structure of the bid-call and the pedagogical approach by which the practice is taught in a professional auction instruction program. Chapters 3 and 4 will examine the musical structures of the bid-call—pitch, melody, rhythm, and meter, as indicated both by practitioners’ descriptions of the auction-chant and by analytical consideration of chant transcriptions. In chapter 5, the improvisatory practice of the auctioneer is considered as a fusion of formulaic and strategic devices. Chapter 6 explores chant style as a function of both sales type and personal habit. Chapter 7 concludes with a theoretical analysis of social structure and transformation in the auction chant performance, suggesting that the improvisatory strategies employed in the bid-call create a unified musical space within which social meaning is created.

Although I have characterized auctioneering as a “hidden” practice, it is indeed a common event in American public life. Because auctioneers usually self-identify as salesmen and business owners first and performers second (at most), the virtuosic improvisatory practice of the auctioneer has been largely concealed, even from the performers themselves. The extent to which musical performance is integrated into the social practice of the auction method has,
perhaps, obscured its musical import, but to remove the music from its context would be to divest it of its very nature. Thus, in the following pages, I attempt to examine the music of the auction as both a sonic and social event where musical choices are made for both aesthetic and social purposes, inextricably linked in the sound that sells.
CHAPTER 2

A STUDENT IN THE FIELD: BID-CALL FUNDAMENTALS AND THE PEDAGOGY OF AUCTIONEERING

It is 8:15 am in Clear Lake, Iowa, just outside the town of Mason City. Seventy-two adults are standing in the ballroom of the Clear Lake Best Western Holiday Lodge chanting in unison. An exotic animal dealer from Texas, a retired CEO from Canada, a cattle farmer from Germany, and a musicology doctoral candidate are locked in rhythm and tempo together, regaling passers-by with a tale about a woman and some bad butter.

In a week and a half the students of the World Wide College of Auctioneering live through days of intensive training to learn a stylized and wholly unnatural form of verbal performance. It is not uncommon to walk through the halls of the hotel and hear people murmuring auction chants under their breath or conducting entire conversations in rhythm and steady tempo to imbed the feeling of the bid-call somewhere deep in their minds and bodies. Early mornings and late nights, and shared hard work create an immediate community among the diverse student body. Indeed, at the end of the week, even some of the toughest cowboys in the room are in tears as they speak at graduation.

My training at World Wide College of Auctioneering afforded me the opportunity to attain an admittedly minimal level of proficiency in the practice
of bid-calling, but also to experience the pedagogical methods employed in the instruction of auctioneering. Equally important, my fieldwork at the school allowed me to forge significant research relationships with a number of professional auctioneers—many of who served as invaluable informants in later stages of my ethnographic research.

The following chapter provides an overview of my ethnographic research at auction school, using the experience as a vehicle through which to introduce the basic components of the bid-call. Additionally, I will examine the pedagogy of bid-calling through the lens of a beginning student. Surely, as a participant-observer, my own struggles and experiences with the acquisition of bid-calling skills cannot be wholly separated from my critical assessments of the instruction process, nor would such a separation provide particularly meaningful analysis. To the extent that self-awareness allows, I have made every attempt to present personal reflections as such.

Critical analysis of the pedagogy of bid-calling is framed as a dialogue between four distinct yet interconnected threads. The ethnographic data is the first thread, providing essential information about the structure of auction school, the people involved, and the materials and practices employed in auction school training. The voices of auction school instructors, shared primarily through interviews with the author, exist as a second thread in the study. As a beginning auctioneering student, a trained musician, jazz improviser, and musicologist, my voice represents a third thread in the dialogue, and where
useful I will invoke that voice to describe the experiential data of the instruction process and my engagement with the various challenges and stages of that process. The last thread in this dialogue includes the voices of scholars from the fields of linguistics, ethnomusicology, musicology and, music pedagogy whose studies of auctioneering and/or the pedagogy of improvised musics contextualize auctioneering practice within broader academic disciplines. The works of scholars in these diverse fields provide useful models for understanding the methods of auctioneering pedagogy and the underlying structures of the practice itself. With these four threads, I hope to provide not only an account of the auction school experience, but also an ethnographic record of the methods and functions of this style of instruction.

**Auction Schools and World Wide College**

The first documented auction school in the United States was Jones National School of Auctioneering and Oratory, which opened in 1904 in Davenport, Iowa.\(^1\) The Jones school operated for approximately sixteen years, after which time all mention of the school disappears from industry publications. Surely, individual apprentice instruction must have predated the opening of the first formal auction school, as the American auction industry was already robust at the turn of the twentieth century; in 1901, there were 6,924 documented and registered auctioneers in the United States, with the majority coming from the

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Midwest and the East Coast. The oldest, currently operational auction school is The Missouri Auction School, founded in 1905, located in St. Joseph, Missouri.

The National Auctioneers Association lists thirty-two auction schools in the United States as of 2010. Because auction license laws vary in each state and because auction schools cater to students from around the country and the world, auction schools themselves are not licensing institutions. Rather, auction schools provide professional training for auctioneers in the fundamentals of a variety of aspects of the profession, from auction law and appraisal to the development of the bid-call. Auction school programs last anywhere from five days to two weeks depending on the school and curriculum.

I attended World Wide College of Auctioneering during its June 2010 session. The college was founded in 1933 by Col. Joe Reisch and is currently run

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by President Paul C. Behr and Vice President Vicky Flickinger. Behr is a renowned auctioneer, holding multiple championship titles. He was named the first International World Champion Auctioneer by the National Auctioneers Association in 1988, World Champion Livestock Auctioneer in 1989, All Round World Champion by the Auctioneers Association of Canada in 1995, and Auctioneer of the Year by the National Auto Auction Association in 2011. Behr lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is the lead auctioneer for Mannheim Denver and Mannheim Colorado Automobile Auctions, and where he runs the World Automobile Auctioneer Championships.

World Wide offers three sessions a year: two are held in Mason City and one is held in Denver. Sessions are nine days long (Saturday through Sunday), with a daily class schedule starting at 8 am and ending between 9 pm and 10 pm each evening. The class session I attended included seventy-one students; this was a large class size, but not considerably out of scale with other sessions. Eighteen instructors taught the class over the week and a half session; most were present for one to two days of the session, thus allowing for a constantly rotating group of four to seven instructors on each day of the course.

The pedagogical systems employed by the instructors at World Wide were of two distinct types. The first, which requires little discussion here, consisted entirely of lecture presentations on a variety of subjects: auction law, creating an auction business, the technology of the business, running an auction house, real estate auctions, care and maintenance of the voice, etc. The lecture component of
each day’s instruction generally occurred in the evenings, after a full day of drills and bid-calling instruction. With two exceptions (discussed below), lectures did not treat the mechanics of the bid-call. Rather, lectures focused on the financial, legal, and business issues fundamental to the profession and largely served to prepare students for the types of material they would need to learn in order to pass state licensing examinations.

The majority of the school day (8 am to 5 pm) was spent on chant drills and small-group practice sessions, and represented an entirely different pedagogical approach from the evening lecture sessions. The vocal practice of the session occupied the majority of classroom instruction time and comprises the focus of my ethnographic engagement with the program. The instruction of bid-calling at World Wide is based on a model of repetition and the systematic introduction of new challenges in small group settings.

**Technical Exercises: Mornings at World Wide**

Morning sessions started promptly at 8 am when all students and instructors began the day together in one of the hotel’s ballrooms. If students were slow to enter the room, President Paul Behr would step up to the microphone and start chanting as a sort of call to order. Morning sessions always commenced with thirty to forty-five minutes of tongue twisters and number scales, commonly referred to in the school as “Daily Dozens.” Paul Behr explains the purpose of tongue twisters: “Tongue twisters are words and phrases repeated rhythmically to create the basics for rhythm in an auction chant. They
help with developing control and establishing rhythm and cadence in our chant. Also, they help with breathing and building confidence." In my experience, the tongue twister exercises also served to build muscle memory and stamina and to develop speed in one’s chant. Morning warm-ups began with the following eight tongue twisters:

2. Tommy Attatimus: Tommy Attatimus took two T’s tied them to the top of two tall trees.
3. The Handle/Hammer: The handle goes up and the hammer comes down.
5. Engine Engine #9: Engine, engine #9 running down Chicago line, if the engine jumps the track, you will get your money back.
6. Around the Ruff & Rugged Rock: Around the ruff and rugged rock the ragged rascal ran.
7. Woodchuck: How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? A woodchuck would chuck as much wood as a woodchuck could if a woodchuck could chuck wood!
8. Better Botter: Betty Botter bought some butter, but she said this butter’s bitter. If I put it in my batter it will make my batter bitter, so she bought a bit of better butter, put it in her bitter batter, made her bitter batter better, so tis better Betty Botter bought a bit of better butter.5

As a group, the entire class would chant each tongue twister three times in units of ten repetitions, for a total of thirty times through each exercise. Each day, the tempo for the tongue twisters increased slightly, so that, by the end of the nine-


5 World Wide College of Auctioneering, “Tongue Twisters and Number Scales: The Daily Dozen Drills to a Successful Chant” (instructional worksheet). See Appendix A for a full copy of the Daily Dozen Drills sheet as published by World Wide College of Auctioneering.
day course, students were expected to chant each exercise approximately twice as fast as they had been chanting at the beginning of the week. The longest of the tongue twisters, “Betty Botter,” was introduced to the class at an introductory rate of speed: students chanted the entire text in fourteen seconds. By the end of the course, the class was chanting this same tongue twister in only seven seconds.

After tongue twisters, the class would move on to number scales. Number scales are exercises much like tongue twisters in that the students are tasked with the repeated chanting of specific patterns. In the case of number scales, the patterns consist of ascending and descending increments that are meant to familiarize the beginning auctioneer with the types of bid increments she will need to use in an auction. Paul Behr explains, “Number scales are simply saying or counting the numbers in a rhythmic cadence.”

Like tongue twisters, number scales aid in the development of muscle memory, clear articulation, voice projection, and stamina. In particular, the repetition of these exercises develops a student’s ability to clearly declaim the numbers that are more difficult to pronounce rapidly. Sixes are by far the most difficult numbers to call at a fast speed, but fours (particularly fourteen and forty) and fives (particularly fifteen and fifty) pose problems as well. The soft consonants are

6 Behr, Auctioneering Practice Training CD.
easy to stumble over and slur, and developing clarity on these numbers is crucial in order to maintain a consistent, clear chant style regardless of the number.

The number scale exercises require students to chant the following:

1. One’s: 1 to 100 ascending and descending by one’s (1, 2, 3, 4, ..., 100, 95, 94, 93, ..., 2, 1)

2. Two and a Halves: 2 ½, 5, 7 ½, 10, 12 ½, 15, 17 ½, 20, 22 ½, 25, 27 ½, 30, 32 ½, 35, 37 ½, 40, 42 ½, 45, 47 ½, 50, 52 ½, 55, 57 ½, 60, 62 ½, 65, 67 ½, 70, 72 ½, 75, 77 ½, 80, 82 ½, 85, 87 ½, 90, 92 ½, 95, 97 ½, 100 (Then reverse, counting back from 100 by increments of 2 ½)

3. Five’s: 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90, 95, 100 (Then reverse, counting back from 100 by increments of 5)

4. Ten’s: 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100

5. Quarters: One, one and a quarter, one and a half, one seventy-five, Two, two and a quarter, two and a half, two seventy-five, Three, three and a quarter, three and a half, three seventy-five, Four, four and a quarter, four and a half, four seventy-five, Five, five and a quarter, five and a half, five seventy-five, Six, six and a quarter, six and a half, six seventy-five, Seven, seven and a quarter, seven and a half, seven seventy-five, Eight, eight and a quarter, eight and a half, eight seventy-five, Nine, nine and a quarter, nine and a half, nine seventy-five, Ten, ten and a quarter, ten and a half, ten seventy-five...

(Continuing to 100 and reverse to 1)\(^7\)

In addition to the development of clarity and muscle memory, number scales serve an especially important function in the acquisition of bid-calling skills. An auctioneer must internalize ascending and descending patterns of numbers in a

\(^7\) World Wide College of Auctioneering, “Tongue Twisters and Number Scales: The Daily Dozen Drills to a Successful Chant.”
variety of incremental units so that the numbers themselves come automatically to her during the sale.

The semantic correlation between number scales and musical scales is indeed meaningful, and provides a useful way for thinking about the structure, purpose, and function of the exercises. Beginning music students are taught musical scales early on in their training, but why? Once a student memorizes and truly internalizes musical scales, she has developed a deep-rooted memory of specific patterns that she can refer to in a myriad of real-world musical performances. The trained auctioneer must be able to perform the scales without conscious thought. In the act of performance, the trained musician no longer pauses to think, “This passage is in F minor; what note follows C in the F minor scale?” Rather, the pattern of the scale is so deeply embedded in the player’s acquired skill set that the pitch collection is recalled and employed automatically. Likewise, number scales allow the student auctioneer to develop number pattern recall such that she does not have to pause in her performance process to think, “My last bid was $1500, and I am increasing by increments of $250; what is the next number I need to ask from the bidders?” At times, an auctioneer must be prepared to change numbers once or even twice in a second, so the increments (like intervals in a musical scale) must come automatically.

Number scales presented one of the biggest and most humbling challenges for me (and, I suspect, for many of my fellow students). I, of course, assumed that, as an educated adult, I could count. While this may be true, I soon
learned that counting in tempo, at speed, and in varying increments both
ascending and descending was extremely difficult. When, simultaneously
responding to incoming bids, maintaining an interesting and fluid chant, and
moving the sale along in a timely fashion, it becomes extremely difficult for the
beginning auctioneer to remember what number she is on, what bid she just
received (which, sometimes, must be reiterated for the audience to clarify the
status of the auction), and what number she needs to ask for next. The
internalization of number scales frees the auctioneer up to focus on the many
constantly shifting dynamics of the sale and the auction chant.

Tongue twisters also aid in the acquisition of speed, not only through
strategic repetition and increased tempo, but also in the manner by which the
exercises highlight the relationship between chant singing and tempo. This
relationship is perhaps most obvious in the practice materials that the school
sends to registered students for preparation before an upcoming session. On the
school’s practice CD, President Behr performs each of the tongue twisters,
starting at a very slow tempo in a speaking voice. He speeds up the chant
progressively to demonstrate the way that the student will need to slowly
increase speed in her training. In each of Behr’s exercise performances, there is a
distinct point at which the tempo of the tongue-twister can no longer increase if
it is to remain in a speaking voice. At this point, the declamation of the tongue
twister shifts into sung performance. It is clear in each exercise that chanting on
sung pitches allows for speeds impossible with the spoken voice alone. The
“breaking point” at which speaking will no longer suffice for faster speed seems to occur between 168 and 208 beats per minute; it is within this range of tempos that Behr shifts from speech to chant in each recorded exercise.

The shift from speech to song is not directly addressed in either the school’s practice materials or its instructional sessions. Because auctioneering is not taught as a musical practice and because few auctioneers self-identify as musicians, there are many such instances in the pedagogy of auctioneering in which concepts and practices are taught without acknowledgment, or perhaps even recognition, of their underlying musical characteristics. Because the instruction of auctioneering is practice-based, such theoretical explanations are not necessary for the auctioneering student. If the student replicates the practice demonstrated in the exercise materials, she will acquire skills in musical performance whether or not she is aware of it.

The sung drone pitch on which the auctioneer chants during the sale is called the “hum.” The hum and its melodic pattern and function are covered in more detail in chapter 3, but it is apparent that the hum is distinctly separate from spoken pitch. The hum presents pitch specificity and consistency far beyond the formant areas of speech, and once an auctioneer finds his ideal hum, he tends to auction on or close to that pitch for hours, days, months, and years. At the start of auction school, most students did not have a hum and many attempted to bid-call in regular speech. The number scale drills in the morning and afternoon helped students find a hum, though (with one exception)
instructors did not address the hum directly during these exercises. During the lengthy repetitions of number scales and tongue twisters, instructors would stand in front of the class to model good projection and clarity with the exercises, and in so doing, would inevitably ease the students into a chant including both consistent tempo and rhythm and sung pitch.

The instructor who did address the hum directly in his teaching during drill sections was Iowa-based auctioneer Darrell Cannon. Cannon took over the leadership role at World Wide in the middle of the week when President Paul Behr had to travel back to Denver to conduct three days of car auctions, and as such, Cannon functioned as a sort of second-in-command to Behr. In drill practice with Cannon, the importance of the hum was made clear. Cannon told the students that those who were still struggling to create a smooth, consistent rhythm were having trouble primarily because they had not yet established a hum. To demonstrate this fact, he asked the class to count to ten, stop, hum at a comfortable pitch level, and then count to ten again. On the second attempt, the class was rhythmically unified from the start and was able to count faster. Cannon did not instruct the class to count to ten the second time on a sung pitch, but having set the hum pitch with the students after the first round of counting, each did so without realizing it in the next exercise. With a steady and pitch-specific hum, rhythm improved and speed increased. As Cannon explained to
the class the hum will “make it smooth as glass,” cautioning that “if your chant gets choppy, the only thing you’ve done is forgotten to hum.”

The Fundamentals of the Bid-Call: Two- and Three-Part Chant

The primary purpose of the chant is to facilitate and direct bidders from low bids to high bids through incremental price increases in a continuous and fluid style of declamation that seamlessly connects the ongoing progression of bids. Lulls in bidding activity require the auctioneer to remain in the same place for seconds or minutes depending on the type of sale. Instructor Jim Seeck emphasized that an auctioneer must be able to “cycle” on one number for an hour, emphasizing the necessity for continuous chant during periods of both bidding progress and stagnancy. At stagnant points, the auctioneer must enter into a temporarily closed loop, cycling between the last number bid and the next desired number as long as it takes to bring in a new bid or to determine that the sale must conclude. The progression through a sale can be summarized in reduction, as a series of advancing numbers with cycles between numbers lasting an indeterminate amount of time. A sale opening at ten dollars and finishing at eighty dollars, where bidding progresses quickly through the first three increments but stalls between other increments might be reduced to the


9 Jim Seeck, recorded phone interview by Nicole Malley, September 13, 2010.
following representative model: 10, 20, 30\rightarrow 40, 50\rightarrow 60\rightarrow 70, 80. The auctioneer is charged with filling in this abstract model, connecting the numbers in interesting and effective ways that maintain momentum and encourage additional bidding.

While the tongue twister exercises and number scales aid in the development of technical facility, neither represent examples of actual bid-calling as performed during a sale. The skills necessary for navigating through the abstract model of progression and cyclical repetition above were taught largely through practice and repetition in small-group drill sections, but some instruction on the structure of the bid-call was provided in the lectures. On the first day of classes, Behr presented a talk entitled “Basic Bid-calling 101: Defining a Chant,” in which the building blocks of the auction chant were introduced as functions of two basic structures: the two-part chant and the three-part chant. At its most basic level, the chant communicates what dollar amount has been bid on an item and what bid the auctioneer wants next. To communicate this information consistently throughout the sale, the auctioneer connects the declamation of the numbers by way of filler words. The two chant types provide structures within which the auctioneer can develop facility in communicating the necessary information and in connecting numbers and filler words, ultimately developing her own style as a bid-caller.

The two-part chant includes a statement and a suggestion. If the most recent bid on an item was five dollars, the two-part chant includes the following information: “I’m bid five dollars, now ten.” The three-part chant includes a
statement, suggestion, and question. Thus, the same situation expressed in a three-part chant might be, “I’m bid five dollars, now ten. Would you give ten?” Regardless of how much stylization an auctioneer employs, these basic components are required to inform an audience and lead them to the next bid.

The two- and three-part chant structures can be understood as finite grammatical formulae—specific components of discourse structures, as proposed by Koenraad Kuiper, in his linguistic study of auctioneering, *Smooth Talkers: The Linguistic Performance of Auctioneers and Sportscasters*. Kuiper states:

Auctions are not like commentaries in that there are no external events to narrate. Instead, the auctioneer creates the verbal framework within which external events such as the holding aloft of a lot at an antique auction, take place. This, the structure of an auction is its discourse structure.10

The discourse structure of auctioneering is a set of steps through which all auctions proceed. The bid-call itself is but one component of the discourse structure, as we can see below in Kuiper’s auction outline:

1. Description of the lot
2. Opening bid search
3. Bid-calling
4. Bid locator
5. Interpolations
6. Presale formulae
7. Sale epilogue11


11 Kuiper, 41-2, 61, 70-1. Kuiper never presents the full discourse structure in one model. When Kuiper introduces discourse structure, he details the process only
While these seven steps are present to varying degrees depending on the type of auction, all auctions observe this general outline. Essentially, the auction progresses through the steps of the discourse structure from the introduction and description of the item, through the commencement of bidding, bid-calling, closing gestures marking the end of the sale, and the actual close of the sale.

Kuiper posits that auction structures have a hierarchical organization, such that within each of these seven “discourse functions” additional subsidiary structural levels exist. These subsidiary levels are comprised of formulae, or finite grammars within which the auctioneer can organize the information relating to the discourse function at hand. Kuiper explains:

> A finite grammar can be thought of as a kind of machine that moves from state to state, emitting a word along the way at each state. Such machines are finite because they permit only a very limited number of grammatically acceptable utterances to be produced….I suppose from now on that all formulae are finite systems of this type. This allows for an important distinction to be made. The formula as a finite state diagram is part of a speaker’s competence, that is, part of the set of linguistic resources that he or she has at his or her command.12

through the interpolation stage, but, in later discussions, adds the discourse functions of presale formulae and sale epilogue. Clearly, all auctions include these steps, so, in the reduction above, I have condensed his model—developed throughout a chapter—into one outline. Kuiper does offer a complete model for the discourse structure in an earlier publication: Koenraad Kuiper and Dennis Haggo, “Livestock Auctions, Oral Poetry and Ordinary Language,” *Language and Society* 13 (1984): 205-234. In this article, the same discourse structure is presented, but without the inclusion of the bid locator.

12 Ibid., *Smooth Talkers*, 45.
The bid-call, as either a two- or three-part chant structure, is a finite grammar structure regulated by auction-specific formulae that limit the auctioneer’s basic structural choices to a repeating, closed cycle of statement-suggestion, statement-suggestion, statement-suggestion, etc., or statement-suggestion-question, statement-suggestion-question, statement-suggestion-question, etc. It is with this basic model that Behr introduced the practice of bid-calling to World Wide students—albeit in a less theoretical articulation—and upon this model, a progressive pedagogical system was employed to slowly develop bid-calling skills.

**The Basic Bid-Call in Practice: The Anatomy of a Sale**

While Kuiper’s model of discourse structure provides an abstracted description of the linguistic paradigm of the bid-call, the performance of bid-calling involves a great deal more than the structured act of communication. An individual auction will differ slightly from the general type described here, but the basic actors, agents, and actions are common throughout various auction types. Significant exceptions, such as the tobacco auction, will be discussed in chapter 5, but even the outliers in the field of auctioneering employ the same basic components.

In addition to the bidding audience and the auctioneer, most auctions include additional support staff personnel who assist the auctioneer in conducting the sale. Normally, the auctioneer will stand or sit at a podium or in a truck topper in front of the bidding audience, except in situations such as car
lot sales or tobacco auctions where the auctioneer may stand on the ground with the bidding audience and move through the auction space with them. The clerk will be seated next to or near the auctioneer, recording winning bids as each lot is sold. Many auctioneers use ringmen or bid-spotters for sales with large audiences or in situations where it is difficult for one auctioneer to see all bidders simultaneously. Ringmen circulate in front of or through the bidding audience, indicating when a new bid is placed by shouting, yelping, or otherwise calling to the auctioneer. Some auctions, such as dealer car auctions, will employ one ringman who circulates freely through the bidding audience; in situations where two or more ringmen are employed, each ringman is held responsible for one section of the bidding audience so that two ringmen will not call the same bid up to the auctioneer.

An auction consists of the individual sale of virtually any type of item, real estate, personal property, or intellectual property. With the exception of some real estate auctions, most auctions will consist of a number of lots, or

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13 Truck toppers are found most often at rural agricultural and estate sales. Toppers are tall, enclosed booths that attach above the bed of a pickup truck and have room for the auctioneer and up to three additional assistants. A topper is constructed such that the auctioneer can stand and see the bidding audience through large windows. Modern toppers come equipped with installed sound systems, desks, cabinets, and fans and/or air conditioners. Essentially, these toppers act as mobile stages, offices, and sound systems for the auctioneer, allowing him to sell on site and on location virtually anywhere and in any weather. Toppers often double as advertising for the auctioneer and are commonly decorated with the name of the auction company and information about auction services.
individual pieces up for sale. While a real estate auction may feature only one lot, a tobacco auction may feature hundreds or even thousands of lots for sale on one day. Regardless of the number of lots, each individual lot will be sold in the same basic manner.

The auctioneer will briefly describe the lot coming up for sale and will normally commence bidding by offering an opening dollar amount for the starting bid. If a bidder is willing to place a bid at this opening number, he will indicate it through any number of physical or verbal cues including a head-nod, a raised hand or bidder number, direct eye contact with a ringman, or a yelp or shout of “yes,” “yep,” or some similar positive statement. If no bidder is willing to start on the auctioneer’s initial dollar amount, the auctioneer will lower the opening bid suggestion until he finds a willing bidder. Mastery of the number scales, which require the student to learn both ascending and descending numbered increments, allows the auctioneer to make a smooth transition in this common opening descent. While some auctioneers choose to start low and get going as quickly as possible, other auctioneers will use the opening bid suggestion as a sort of cue to the bidding audience, suggesting the price range in which the auctioneer believes the item should end up selling. Some auctioneers conduct this opening bid search in a speaking voice while others conduct it in their chant.

Once an opening bid is placed, the sale begins. Those auctioneers who conduct the opening bid search in a spoken voice switch into their chant at this
point. The auctioneer calls out new bid requests and he and/or his ringmen field those bids, acknowledging the high bidder and introducing the next desired bid amount after each new bid is received. If bidding slows on an item, the auctioneer may choose to “re-sell,” it, wherein he pauses his chant, returns to a speaking voice, and interjects a few additional comments about the value and desirability of the item. In some high-dollar auctions—most often real estate sales—the auctioneer may take a break entirely in the middle of the sale. This usually occurs when bidding has stalled or may occur if the bidding is hovering at a price lower than the seller had anticipated. In the case of the latter scenario, the auctioneer may use the break to speak with the seller to determine if he will lower his expectations to accept a price below his initially desired price. During a break in an auction, the auctioneer will leave the podium or stage altogether, and the auction may recess for up to fifteen minutes.14

After the re-sale or recess, the auctioneer begins his chant again and continues to solicit new bids until it is clear that no more bids are imminent. At this point, the auctioneer usually chants or speaks some sort of closing phrase or question to alert the bidders to the fact that the sale is almost over. Common closing alerts include, “going once, going twice,” “all in, all done?” and “last call.” After this alert, the auctioneer declares the item sold, indicates the winning

14 The practice of taking a recess during an auction seems to be specific to certain regions. Many Eastern and Southern auctioneers do not use the recess, while in many Midwestern communities, it is both common and expected that a real estate auction will have a recess.
bidder by his registered number or by his name, and the amount for which the item has been purchased. Depending on a number of variables, an auction will be classified as either absolute or reserve. Absolute auctions are ones in which every item sells for the highest bid regardless of the price. In a reserve auction, the seller has set a minimum price below which he will not allow the item to be sold. The bidding audience does not know what the minimum price is, but legally, they must be informed if the sale is reserve or absolute. In the case of a reserve sale, the auctioneer must keep in mind what the reserve price for each item is as the sale progresses in order to push for the reserve price, but also in order to inform the audience whether the lot sells or does not meet the reserve. High-ticket items, such as real estate, automobiles, rare antiques and collectibles, and racehorses are items that will frequently be sold on a reserve basis.

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By law, the auctioneer must say the word “sold” at the end of each lot’s sale in order to make the sale legal and to affect the transfer of goods from the seller to the buyer. Exceptions to this practice occur when an item is sold “on reserve,” which means that the seller has agreed to sell the item only if a minimum bid is received. If the reserve is not met, the auctioneer will not declare the item sold (though often, the high bidder and seller will come to an agreement after the auction). An exception to the “sold” rule was encountered in my fieldwork at racehorse auctions at Keeneland, where no horses were declared sold. Rather, the high bid and bidder were acknowledged, and the sale was completed through the exchange of transactional paperwork immediately following the sale. Because some horses were sold on reserve and some were not and because the community of horse buyers and sellers prefer not to publicize the fact that a horse has not met a reserve, the status of the sale was not broadcast by the auctioneer.
In the majority of auctions encountered in my fieldwork, this entire process commonly occurs between sixty and ninety times per hour, or, in the extreme case of tobacco auctioneering, as many as five hundred times per hour.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, it is incumbent upon auctioneering instructors and auction school programs to implement a pedagogical approach that not only teaches the fundamentals of the bid-call, but also the integration of the bid-call into the larger structure of the real-world auction. Even the brief, general description of a standard auction above reveals just how many activities and skills are expected from the performing auctioneer. Mastery of the discourse functions of the bid-call and the finite grammatical formulae of numbers and filler words are but one part of the auction performance.

**Building a Chant: Filler Words**

The formulae with which the auctioneer constructs the bid-call consist of numbers (introduced and practiced in number drills) and filler words. Filler words are the connecting words and phrases that facilitate smooth transitions between the basic components of the two- and three-part chant. In both two- and three-part chants, there are only two pre-determined words: the number of the most recent bid and the number of the next desired bid. The auctioneer has a variety of options regarding word choice surrounding these numbers in the form

\textsuperscript{16} In the case of tobacco auctioneering, the opening description of the lot is either entirely absent or extremely abbreviated, and mid-lot re-sales are extremely rare.
of filler words. For example, the same auction scenario could be stated a number of ways in a two-part chant:

“I’m bid five dollars, now ten.”

“I’m at five dollars, and ten.”

“Five dollars here, now ten.”

Likewise, the same auction scenario in a three-part chant might be stated in any of the following ways:

“I’m bid five dollars, now ten. Would you give ten?”

“Five dollars here, now ten. Ten dollars where?”

“Five dollars down, now ten. Anybody give ten?”

“Five now ten. Are you able to give ten?”

These variations are but a few of the many ways in which the basic two and three-part chant structure can be tailored to an auctioneer’s personal style.

In his lecture notes, Behr indicates that filler words fulfill both musical and communicative roles:

Filler words are a necessary part of a good smooth, rhythmic chant. They help you strike rapport with your crowd and communicate your selling message in 10-20 seconds. Some filler words are: here, there, abletobuym, woodygive, heretobuy, sir/ma’am, Dollar, money. Remember that good filler words should pop in your mouth and force your tongue toward the front of your mouth toward the back of your teeth. If you’ve selected a filler word that requires your tongue to move back into your mouth (like
got) you should try something else. Any time the bidding is not coming fast enough to count 123456789, then we will use some sort of filler.\footnote{Paul Behr, “Basic Bid-calling 101: Defining a Chant” [instructional handout accompanying lecture presentation] (Mason City, Iowa: World Wide College of Auctioneering, 2010), 5.}

All instructors at World Wide echoed Behr’s suggestion that filler words maintain smooth rhythm. While I will treat the specific rhythmic role of filler words in detail in chapter 4, the concept of “smooth rhythm” articulated by instructors at auction school seemed to indicate steady tempo rather than specific rhythmic gestures or patterns. The term rhythm was used frequently as a pedagogical concept, though with a broader and more flexible meaning than one would encounter in musical instruction.

According to Behr, filler words should have some sort of value as interesting sounds, thus the specific directives regarding their “pop” and mouth placement. Behr’s warning against filler words formed in the back of the mouth like “got” were also reiterated throughout the course of the session. “Got” itself was forbidden in our chants, and all instructors were quick to point out use of the word. The “got” problem plagued most students at World Wide at one point or another during the session. Indeed, many students who did not start out saying “got” in their chant soon found it creeping in. In my case, it seemed that the more I tried not to say “got,” the more frequently it appeared in my chant. At times, an instructor would critique a student’s use of “got” in a drill section to the student’s disbelief. It was not uncommon to hear a student say, “I didn’t say
‘got,’ did I?” I was surprised, to say the least, at our inability to recall what we had just chanted, and the fact that we each had habits of speech and thus of chant of which we were unaware. The frequent mention of “got” forced students to actively listen and critique themselves during their bid-call, ferreting out some natural inclinations, as difficult as that process proved to be.

World Wide College instructor and first Women’s International Auctioneer Champion Amy Assiter presented a lecture during the last day of the session on the role and function of filler words. For Assiter, the main role of the filler word is “sound value” (Assiter’s term), by which she means that they provide interest and maintain fluidity within the chant. As Assiter explained in her lecture, each filler word or phrase has a “sound value.” Interesting combinations of words with good sound value positively affect the aesthetic quality of the chant by adding variety of tone, articulation, and sound production. According to Assiter, filler words and phrases that require the auctioneer to vary types of articulations quickly have some of the highest sound values because they “pop.”

Assiter offered a long list of useful filler words, recommending that students work with different words to find those that create the best sound value with their voice and chant style. The following list of filler words provided by Assiter is extensive, but in no way represents all of the filler words commonly used in auctioneering:
I’m bid; now; give; say; bid; make it; dollar; bidder; bidder now; dollar
now; dollar bid; better bid; like a; over here; down there; back there; over
there; down here; dollar down here; dollar down here now; dollar up
here; dollar bidder; would you give; like it here; like a dollar; like it here
now; dollar now up here now; dollar bidder down here; dollar bidder
down here now; dollar down here now; hundred dollar up here now; are
you able to buy them at; here to buy get them on; like a dollar bidder
down here now.\(^\text{18}\)

While Assiter, all the auction school instructors, and most of my interview
informants frequently emphasized clarity and good communication in the
auction chant, it is undeniable that auctioneers are often known best for the
seemingly incomprehensible quality of their bid-call. It is most often the filler
words, and not the numbers, that create the mystique of the unintelligible,
lightning-fast auctioneer in the popular consciousness. For Assiter, the stylistic
manipulation of filler words can be understood as “distortion.” By distortion,
she means that the clear communicative function of the filler words is obscured
in the practice of the bid-call through speed, contraction, and inflection.

Distortion serves a stylistic function and is perhaps the single stylistic
marker of the performing auctioneer. These rapid-fire, unintelligible words are
aurally stimulating, rhythmically engaging, and just hard enough to grasp that
they maintain audience interest. Furthermore, the distinct manner in which each
auctioneer chooses filler words and phrases and distorts them creates one of the
most identifiable components of his or her individual style. Speed and

\(^{18}\) Amy Assiter, “Elements of the Chant” [instructional handout accompanying
lecture presentation] (Mason City, Iowa: World Wide College of Auctioneering,
2010), 3.
contraction operate in tandem on filler words to create distortions as the auctioneer, in attempting to chant as fast as possible, will often contract a phrase, add connecting syllables, or elide syllables in order to declaim the filler word as quickly as possible. For example, the filler phrase, “are you able to buy them at” is frequently distorted to “y’able ta buyem at,” or, as Assiter notes, “yable to bumpit.” Of course, the distorted version is much shorter in duration, and can be chanted more quickly, but the contraction serves two other functions as well. First, it keeps the long filler phrase from distracting the listener from the numbers. Lengthy filler phrases or strings of filler words were discouraged by World Wide instructors, and both Behr and Tom “Spanky” Assiter¹⁹ refer to the preponderance of unnecessary and overly lengthy filler words as “junk.” Second, the distortion creates a distinctive sonic event in the chant. It “pops” in the mouth just as Assiter states, by eliminating long vowels as much as possible and placing hard consonants in the foreground. It also creates a distinctive mystique. “Yable to bumpit” is so distorted that it no longer serves its original communicative function. The listener is not likely to understand that the contracted filler phrase is actually functioning as the third part of the three-part chant, asking the bidders whether they will consider raising their bid to the next increment.

¹⁹Because Assiter has adopted his nickname as his professional name, hereafter I will refer to him as Spanky Assiter.
Example 2.1. Ralph Wade, “Auctioneering My Way,” Instructional CD (excerpt)

Example 2.1 provides an illustration of distortion in the chant of livestock auctioneer Ralph Wade, with whom Amy Assiter studied as a beginning auctioneer. In this excerpt, two sets of text accompany the chant: the first represents the chant as it sounds in performance and includes distorted syllables; the second line of text provides the words that the distorted syllables replace. In some instances, I am not able to make definitive determinations about the meaning of individual distortions and have indicated those with a “?” as possible suggested translations. Wade’s most common distortions occur with the words “down” and “now,” both of which are altered to “dung.” The series of distortions at the end of the chant (“dooga dunga doo dung doo dung two dollar bidder now three”) creates a phrase of distinct rhythmic and musical interest in contrast to the rest of the chant, and Wade’s employment of this device at the chant’s close adds sonic interest and variety as a sort of musical indication of its impending conclusion.

**Ever Outside Your Comfort Zone: Progressive Pedagogical Challenges in Bid-Calling Instruction**

While the fundamentals of the bid-call received the most time and attention during the World Wide program, the school strategically employed a system of instruction by which students’ bid-calling skills were challenged,

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20 The translations of Wade’s distortions were possible due to Amy Assiter’s assistance. Assiter uses many of the same distortions and provided World Wide students with information about her style of distortion during both her lecture presentation and small group bid-call instruction sessions.
questioned, and problematized within the larger structures and demands of real sales scenarios. World Wide’s pedagogical system is a practice-based model, providing students with intensive, repetitive experience conducting mock sales from the first day. These sales occurred in bid-calling drill sections and comprised the majority of instruction time at World Wide (approximately four to six hours per day). In these sections, the class was broken up into groups of twelve to fifteen students, and each group worked with one of the four to seven World Wide instructors at a time. Drill sections lasted approximately an hour each, and when the hour was over, the group would move to another room with a different instructor to run drills again. Morning sessions often consisted of two “rounds” of drill sections, and afternoon sessions included two to four additional rounds.

Although the pedagogical approach to chant instruction is deliberate and progressive, the bid-calling practice being taught is not a notated oratorical or musical style. The practice is conveyed through an oral tradition to students who largely consider themselves non-musicians. Because of this fact, I encountered a number of situations during auction school in which I felt frustrated or confused about the pedagogical techniques employed. From the perspective of a trained musician and music instructor, I found myself considering the ways in which many of the techniques and skills could be expressed in musical notation or with specific musical terminology. I yearned for a document containing all the options for filler words or a set of notated
examples explaining how to connect different numbers and intervals with specific filler words to create a metrically consistent, rhythmically engaging chant. Auctioneering is, however, an oral tradition, passed on to aspiring practitioners through verbal instruction and practice. Although I may have grappled with a certain level of cognitive dissonance trying to learn musical techniques in a very different way from an institutional, notation-based system, I was constantly reminded in the act of bid-calling that an auctioneer operates without a script and without notation. It became clear to me that notation would simply have added an unnecessary intermediate step. It would surely have provided a sense of comfort to have some written model to fall back on, but we aspiring auctioneers would soon have had to dispense with notated material to perform the bid-call. As such, the pedagogical method of oral transmission and repetitive practice better prepared us for the realities of improvising the bid-call than notated models ever could have.

On the first day of classes, following Behr’s welcome and introductions, students were divided up into their first drill sections. These sections, which

21 The only World Wide instructor to mention notation was livestock auctioneer Matt Lowery. Lowery recommended that students who were still struggling to create a fluid chant write out their chant and practice it with the notation in front of them. These transcriptions were text transcriptions, without any musical notation, but his method could easily be accomplished with the addition of rhythmic or even melodic notation added on. The marked absence of this pedagogical approach by all other instructors at World Wide suggests that the majority of instructors and professional auctioneers prefer the oral pedagogical tradition.
preceded Behr’s lecture on the structure of the bid-call, forced students to perform from the very start. During this first drill, the students’ backgrounds in auctioneering (or lack thereof) were immediately evident. Some students came to World Wide with previous bid-calling experience, but these were the minority to be sure. Most students had some previous exposure to auctions, if not first-hand bid-calling experience. These students included men working in cattle and other livestock industries, support staff members working with auction companies, real estate professionals familiar with auctions from previous sales experiences, people in various areas of the farming and agricultural industries, and men and women familiar with auctions from personal encounters as attendees, hoping to change careers. A few students had little to no experience with auctions whatsoever, including one high school Spanish teacher who had never heard an auctioneer before attending World Wide.

With the exception of the very few students who had some bid-calling skills, the first drill section was a sort of trial by fire. Having had no instruction in bid-calling, students were directed to step up to a podium with a microphone and do whatever they were capable of doing. For some, this resulted in a mock sale of an imaginary item. For others, this involved counting to twenty-five and back, or simply saying their name and hometown. Instructors leading the session provided no feedback or critique, and congratulated and complimented everyone on their first attempts at the auction block. The immediate and immersive approach to bid-calling instruction framed the week’s activities
clearly: the acquisition of bid-calling skills was to be achieved through practice, the constant “doing” of the thing. Indeed, this first exercise also served as an ice-breaker and a low-pressure introduction to public speaking and microphone use (which, for many students, was an entirely new experience), but the overall message was clear: we were going to learn bid-calling by doing it, doing it badly, doing it repeatedly, doing it under new circumstances, and doing it with ever-changing dynamics.

On the second day of classes, the regular schedule of back-to-back drill sections began, and the instruction focused on the basics of the bid-call. Students in the small groups would cycle through turns, each conducting one, two, or three mock sales in row, taking bids from the other students in the group. During these early drill sections, students were allowed to determine the starting price and increments by which they would sell. They were not required to sell an actual item (or even an imagined one); rather, students were to focus solely on creating a fluid chant with accurate number calling and incremental increases and to practice integrating incoming bids into the chant.

In these first drill sections, instructors gave frequent positive feedback, encouraging students to experiment with their chant. In so doing, they assisted students—the majority of whom had little to no public performing experience—in building confidence. Bad habits were pointed out early on and frequently. These included the use of the word “got” mentioned previously, errors in numbers, and the acceptance of non-existent bids. Errors in numbers included
forgetting the increment with which a student was increasing the bid, which often resulted in uneven and unexpected jumps in bid requests.

The acceptance of non-existent bids was a common mistake with beginning auction students. When bids would come quickly, a student would often continue to “count” new bids even after the bidding had stopped. I, too, was guilty of this error and found that the mistake generally arose when I became too focused on the rhythm of my chant. If I settled into a comfortable rhythm and meter and bids were coming fast, I was able to incorporate them into my rhythmic pattern naturally. However, after accepting two or three bids in quick succession, it was all too easy to keep incorporating bids at the rate to which I had become accustomed. I would become comfortable enough with the incoming bids that I anticipated the next bid instead of waiting for it. Instructors created this type of scenario repeatedly to rid students of the tendency to anticipate bids, and in doing so taught a valuable lesson about the ever-shifting pace of real-world auctions. An auctioneer can never become so comfortable with her own chant that she loses focus on the individual incoming bids, nor can she assume that another bid will come just because bids have been coming in at a consistent pace. Bidding can stop at any time, and at these points, the auctioneer must immediately shift from increasing number increments to repeating the last number bid, all without breaking the rhythm of the ongoing chant.

Instructors utilized specific training techniques to assist students in developing control over the constantly shifting speed of an auction. By the
second day, instructors would often direct the classroom to bid very fast, very slow, or to start fast and suddenly shift to slow bidding. This fast-to-slow scenario was the most commonly employed and for good reason. It is not unusual for multiple bidders to participate at the beginning of a sale when the price is still low. At this point, bids are often coming very fast, and the auctioneer must keep pace. However, as a certain point, the bidding will decrease, and ultimately, there will be only two bidders left. Of course, at the end, only one bidder remains. Instructors at World Wide would imitate this situation by instructing the students in the room to act as bidders, bidding frequently and then suddenly, at the instructor’s cue, slowing bidding considerably or ceasing altogether. This technique forced the student to develop strategies for maintaining the rhythm of the chant regardless of the second-to-second pace of incoming bids. Likewise, it trained the student to adjust to the inevitable slowing of the sale, for, while the sale may slow, the auctioneer cannot; it is the auctioneer’s job to maintain intensity and excitement throughout the sale, particularly after the initial bidding rush is over.

Additional performance critiques were offered during these sessions, including warnings to avoid pointing directly at bidders—a practice best avoided, according to World Wide instructors, due to its seemingly aggressive quality. Rather, open hands with palms facing upward were encouraged, as this

22 Usually, the drill instructor would select two to four students to act as bidders so that the mock auctions would not be too chaotic.
gesture is generally considered more welcoming and inviting of bids. Students were coached about movement during their bid-calling as well: students who walked back and forth too much were encouraged to limit their motion to avoid distracting the audience, and students who stood still were encouraged to loosen up and move enough to appear natural and to engage with the audience. Students were critiqued in regard to projection and encouraged to “hit the back wall” regardless of whether they were using a microphone and amplification or not.

On the afternoon of the second day, a new challenge was added to drill sections in the form of ringmen. As described above, ringmen assist the auctioneer in spotting bids and can add a layer of excitement to the auction by encouraging bidders to increase their bids. Ringmen present serious challenges for the auctioneer, however. While they are often necessary for large crowds or auction settings in which the audience is dispersed over a large or difficult-to-see area, the auctioneer must be constantly aware of a number of potential problems in regard to working with ringmen. First, the auctioneer can, herself, continue to take bids from the audience. For example, the auctioneer may see someone place a bid in the front row and may jump to the next increment, having accepted the bid. At the same time, a ringman may shout out a “Yep!” to convey the new bid to the auctioneer, but that bid has already been accepted by the auctioneer; thus, she must be acutely aware of whether that “Yep!” relates to an actual new bid or to the bid just placed and accepted. In addition, the auctioneer must continue to
interact with the bidding audience and engage them, even as she is taking bids from the ringmen.

When multiple ringmen are working a sale, an auctioneer must be the immediate and absolute arbiter of incoming bids from the ringmen. At a good sale, it is not uncommon for two or more ringmen to shout out new bids at the same time. The auctioneer must determine which ringman’s bid to accept and avoid becoming tripped-up in her chant by the multiple pieces of information coming to her from her assistants. When bids are happening quickly and at the same time ringmen are conveying bids to an auctioneer, it is also the auctioneer’s responsibility to interject status updates into her chant; these inform the ringmen and the bidders exactly which bid she has accepted, as the audience and ringmen themselves may not be sure. If an auctioneer hears two ringmen shout at the same time, she will decide which ringman’s bid to take and may say, “John, you’re out,” to indicate to a ringman (John, in this instance) that his bidder did not get the last highest bid and must bid again to stay in the sale. Seasoned auctioneers will often include this status update as part of their chant. Thus, a three-part chant might expand from statement-suggestion-question to statement-suggestion-question-status update. Some examples of this chant expansion are:

“I’m at two-hundred, now two-fifty. Would you go two-fifty? Bob, you’re out.”

or
“I’m bid a thousand and two. Two thousand where? It’s to your man, Bob.”

The addition of ringmen to the drill sections occurred when most students were still struggling to create a slow, smooth, rhythmic chant. Many students were still bid-calling in a speaking voice rather than a sung chant. Few of us felt ready for the new challenge, but the quick addition of new expectations and sale dynamics pushed every student to hone technical skills in surroundings that increasingly approached realistic sale scenarios. The constant addition of new problems, challenges, and sale components, would be the model for the remainder of the program, and it certainly kept students alert. As elements were added to the drill sections, instructors advised on strategies for dealing with the new challenge but also paid close attention to the construction and execution of the bid-call.

By the third day, instructors were structuring drill sections with increasing specificity. Whereas students had been able to bid-call at any starting price they chose and at any increment they desired, instructors quickly began to restrict and guide these decisions. I became comfortable auctioneering in increments of one dollar, starting at one dollar, but found that almost all my progress was derailed when I was required to start at twenty-five dollars and increase in increments of twenty-five. The rhythmic aspects of bid increments will be discussed further in chapter 5, but it will suffice here to point out that each increment has a different rhythmic character. “One,” “two,” and “three”
present quite simple rhythmic implications in the bid-call compared to longer
increments such as “twenty-five,” “fifty,” and (hardest of all) “seventy-five.”

In addition to ringmen and increment variety, students were
progressively challenged to frame their bid-calls within the complete structure of
a real-world auction. The first few days of auction instruction focused entirely
on parts three through five of Kuiper’s discourse structure (bid-calling, bid
locator, and interpolations). Little attention was paid to how we started and
finished our bid-calls, as the initial emphasis was on the development of a
smooth and consistently flowing chant. However, by the third day, students
were guided more specifically with regard to the remaining components of the
auction discourse structure (though, of course, it was not presented in these
terms).

Openings and closings of auctions are usually, though not always,
conducted in normal speech, but both components require the auctioneer to
observe specific guidelines, and in the case of lot description and closings, legal
restrictions. The sale of an individual lot commences with a brief description of
the item. Here, the auctioneer needs to present a short sales pitch to interest
bidders in the qualities of the piece for sale. Auctioneers must be careful to
provide only factual information, as they are legally bound to any claims made
about an item for sale.

Once the lot has been introduced, the auctioneer opens bidding by asking
for a starting bid (point two in Kuiper’s model). Normally, the auctioneer will
offer an initial bid amount and seek out a bidder to start at that number, though occasionally, an auctioneer will ask the bidding audience to shout out an opening bid. Depending on auction type and an auctioneer’s personal style, this opening bid search will be one of two types. Some auctioneers start at a high initial bid, somewhere near the expected (or desired) final price of the sale. Often, no bidder will jump in at an initial high price, and the auctioneer will quickly decrease the opening bid number to a point where she can entice the first bidder to participate. This method reveals one of the reasons why auctioneering students are required to learn their number scales in both ascending and descending order. If an auctioneer suggests an opening bid of one thousand dollars on an antique chair and receives no bid, she must quickly back-track from one thousand, perhaps all the way down to one hundred in a pre-determined incremental pattern, and she must do so quickly, accurately, and in chant.

Auctioneers who employ this method normally do so in order to suggest to the bidding audience that they expect an item to sell in a certain range. These high

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23 There is a danger in leaving the opening bid to the audience, however. The bidding audience is likely to start a bid very low, requiring the auctioneer to spend more time getting up to the “real” price of the lot. Additionally, the auctioneer may find that no one in the bidding audience wants to offer the first bid, and in this case, the auction can start slowly and with a marked lack of excitement. If the goal of a multi-lot auction is to move through as many items as possible as quickly as possible, then the auctioneer needs to be in control of the pace of the auction at all times. Allowing the bidding audience to determine the starting bid takes the control out of the auctioneer’s hands at one of the most crucial points in the process.
opening bids tell an audience that, though the bidding may start at one hundred dollars, the item is worth closer to one thousand.

Many auctioneers do not take the first approach to opening the sale and choose instead to start out right away at a low dollar amount and work up from that point. This approach is more commonly found at sale barn, auction house, estate, and large agricultural auctions where hundreds of small items must be auctioned as quickly as possible. The rationale behind this approach for these sales types is based on a need for speed and efficiency. If an item is only going to go for twenty dollars, the auctioneer does not benefit from spending more than thirty to forty-five seconds on the sale. Thus, a slow start, back-tracking from a high number only slows the sale down. Conversely, on high dollar items, such as a car, large machinery, a house, or a racehorse, the auctioneer will benefit from giving the audience a sense of where the auction may conclude. The sale of a horse expected to sell for one hundred thousand dollars may take five minutes or more if the bidding starts at five hundred dollars. However, the necessary rate of sale in this type of auction is one to one and a half minutes. The sale progresses more quickly if the auctioneer starts high, giving the bidders a sense of where the sale will likely go, bringing the bidders in at the highest possible initial number below that opening bid suggestion.

Ending the auction or individual sale received some attention at auction school, though largely focus was placed on the legalities of the sale’s close. In order for the legal transfer of property to occur at an auction, the auctioneer must
say “sold” and state the amount of the winning bid at the end of the sale. Ending each sale with “sold” was one of the key components of the final exam at auction school such that a large part of a student’s grade on the performance portion of the exam corresponded to her ability to satisfy the legalities of the property transfer.

Students were given comparatively little instruction about closing phrases, but were encouraged to use phrases that worked well for them and effectively indicated that a sale was nearly finished. The closing phrase typically associated with auctioneering, “going once, going twice, sold!” was actually used very seldom by auction school students and instructors. Some students would simply slow down their chant or return to normal speech to indicate that the sale was about to close. Many students and instructors would insert a quick comment indicating that the sale was close to completion (“gotta go,” “it’s gonna sell,” etc.). Still others had developed their own characteristic closing phrases, which became hallmarks of their personal style. Perhaps the favorite of students and instructors during our session was the closing phrase used by our one

24 There are some slight exceptions to this rule. Real estate auctioneers will announce a lot as sold, but the item does not transfer from one owner to the next until all legal documents are completed according to state law (which can occur thirty or more days after the auction). Some auctions—car auctions in particular—will end with the statement “on call” rather than “sold,” meaning that the high bid did not satisfy the seller’s minimum required sales price, but the final bid is close enough to the seller’s reserve that the buyer and seller will be allowed to negotiate the sale further after the auction (normally on the phone, hence the term “on call”).
international student from Germany: “He say no, I say sold!” Instructors did not directly address musical effects useful in the closing of the sale, though my research indicates that auctioneers often utilize very specific rhythmic and melodic gestures both to indicate an imminent close and to complete the sale. These practices will be addressed in chapters 3 and 5.

In addition to sales openings and closings, students were charged with one further structural challenge: the resell. As mentioned above, the resell is a point in the auction when the auctioneer stops the chant altogether and encourages further bidding by extolling the virtues of the item for sale. The resell is quite brief, often only ten to twenty seconds. For the auctioneering student, the most challenging aspect of the resell is remembering what the last bid was before the chant stopped for the resell. At first, this may seem like a small problem: it seems that it cannot be that hard to remember the last number you were chanting furiously. But, I, like many of my fellow students, found that my mind seemed to switch modes entirely as soon as I stopped my chant. Once we returned to normal speech for the resell, the details of the previous bid-call would virtually disappear from memory.

Through the auction school process, I came to believe that the difficulty of the resell was directly related to the “automatic” nature of the bid-call. The number scales are designed to make bid increases second-nature: their purpose is to make the numbers so ingrained with the auctioneer that she is, to an extent, not conscious of the incremental increases as they happen. The number scales
free the auctioneer to think about higher-order elements of the ongoing sale (discussed further in chapter 6), but if the auctioneer is not careful, she can become too unaware of the numbers, producing and increasing them automatically. As long as the auctioneer remains in her chant, this poses little problem, but as soon as the auctioneer shifts out of the “automatic” mode of the bid-call and back to regular speech, the short term memory is likely to shed a great deal of information—most importantly, the last bid.

Another of the most common problems with bid recall after the resale is the tendency to start the bidding back up at one increment higher than the actual last bid. If, for example, I had received a bid of fifty dollars and was asking for fifty-five dollars when I stopped to resell the item, I (like many of my fellow students) would often start the bidding back up at fifty-five, now asking for sixty. I found that my mind would sometimes “save” the last number I was chanting, but I needed to remember that the last number I was chanting before the resell was the bid I was looking for, not the bid I had received.

The overall strategy employed by instructors at World Wide was to keep students alert with an ever-changing set of scenarios. The basics of the chant (in two and three parts) and the role of filler words were addressed fairly infrequently after the second day of instruction. Rather, students were given new challenges in every drill section, forcing them not only to develop strategies for handling structural variables and the various problems and of a given sale, but also to develop these strategies in tandem with a developing skill set in
auctioneering fundamentals. An alternative approach would have been to teach students sample chants and have them bid-call in unison together. This method would have provided students with a “stock” chant, absent of the sales dynamics, and would have allowed students to build confidence and bid-calling skills in an abstract manner before applying those skills to real-world scenarios. Instead, students were given a seemingly overwhelming amount of information, sales scenarios, and changing expectations and asked to navigate them all simultaneously. This makes sense when one considers that an auctioneer’s job is to navigate a constantly changing set of events in each and every sale. Auction school prepared us for that over-arching challenge on the large scale while honing specific techniques on the small scale, and the practice-based pedagogical method of the program made students improvising performers from the first day.
CHAPTER 3
CALLING, CHANTING, SINGING: THE MELODIC PRACTICES OF THE AUCTIONEER

An auctioneer can be understood, in one sense, as a singing salesperson. While audiences and bidders are often struck by the sheer speed and rhythmic complexity of auction chant, the melodic patterns, pitch collections, and singing style of the performing auctioneer contribute, in no small way, to the musicality of the bid-call. Pitch collections and melodic structures display striking similarities across a wide spectrum of auction types in various geographic regions, and although auctioneers rarely identify themselves as singers or musicians of any kind, their practice exhibits the pitch-specificity of song, a highly-structured system of pitch organization, pitch hierarchy, and melodic gesture.

Positioning Auctioneering Within a Continuum of Vocal Practice and Musicological Scholarship

Auction chant blurs the lines between song and speech, but such hybrid practices are not uncommon subjects in the fields of musicological study. Non-Western musical traditions featuring vocal performances along the speech-to-song continuum abound. While I make no attempt to list every such practice (a list which would likely number in the hundreds), some representative cases will suffice to reveal the types of hybrid practices extant in the world of music. In
Nigeria, Hausa children’s songs are highly speech-like, but are considered song.  

Southern black Baptist sermons exhibit heightened speech bordering on chant, which emphasizes both “musical” repetition and protracted vowel durations.  

Béla Bartók remarked on the hybrid nature of Hungarian folk songs in his song collection efforts. British-Jamaican dub and “toasting” styles employ rap-like declamation over recordings, with a heightened speech that features complex rhythmic structures.  

Additionally, a wide range of similar studies exist in the repertoire of Western art music. Daniela Kaleva traces the history of dramatic recitation in melodrama in her article “Melodrama Insertions in Opera: Performance Practice Aspects within Historical Context,” recalling early appearances of dramatic recitation such as Rousseau’s melodrama and Humperdinck’s Der Königskinder.  

Edward Kravitt examines the extent to which early twentieth-century melodramatic recitations employed musical characteristics as part of an historically-informed performance of a “forgotten


28 Daniela Kaleva, “Melodrama Insertions in Opera: Performance Practice Aspects within Historical Context,” in Studien au den deutsch-französischen
While melodramatic recitation appears to have employed few fixed pitches and little scalar reference, Kravitt’s and Marian Wilson Kimber’s descriptions of the performance style suggest a truly stylized performance of language, such that the practice seems difficult to classify strictly as speech.\(^{30}\)

While scholars in the fields of historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, and cognitive, acoustical, and computer science have all weighed in on the often fuzzy boundaries between speech and song, a systematic appraisal of work in these disparate fields has yet to be undertaken. Scholars from all corners of musical academia have attempted to define the difference between speech and song, and both the musical and non-musical characteristics of vocal sound production have been used as tools for description and classification. While John Blacking famously defines music as “humanly organized sound,”\(^ {31}\) understandings of the concept of song (versus speech) tend to focus on specific attributes of vocal production in order to classify a practice as

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music or speech. Indeed, the primary and most frequently cited characteristic of song is its use of distinct pitch. David Burrows, in both “Singing and Saying”[^32] and *Sound, Speech, and Music*[^33] gives priority to pitch as the most significant marker of song. David Gerhard[^34] in computer science and sound research and George List[^35] in ethnomusicology also find pitch to be the first observable attribute of song over speech. Stable pitch can be measured with acoustical analysis in regard to frequency, and indeed, Gerhard’s attempts to create a computer program that can discern song from speech rely on pitch frequency as the primary indicator of musical vocal production. List specifies that stability of pitch is characteristic of most song practices, basing his own categorizations of practices on a system of classification that privileges pitch as one of, if not the most important characteristic markers of music.

The scientific study of the voice, however, reveals the problem of discerning musical pitch over spoken “pitch.” It is possible to isolate and analyze formants in speech, and the concentration of the acoustic energy into


[^34]: David Bruce Gerhard, “Computationally Measurable Differences Between Speech and Song” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2003).

clearly identifiable energy bands. Formants do not exhibit pitch frequency but approximate it, and numerous acoustical studies have found that formants often tend to focus in particular “pitch” areas. Boswell reveals contour and specific pitch and formant similarities between folk song and spoken versions of the text of the same song, suggesting that even slightly stylized speech often possesses many, if not all of the markers of song. While Elizabeth Stegemöller and colleagues find that the relationship between formant groups and pitch is closer for those with formal singing training, Stone, Cleveland and Sundberg show that extremely close relationships exist between speech and song formant and frequencies for American country singers. It is provocative, at the very least, to surmise whether the relationship between pitch specificity in speech and song in country and folk musics may provide some clues to the musical quality of auction chant.

George List and David Gerhard contend that identifiable scalar structures are a second-order requisite for the classification of song versus speech. While many vocal traditions and specific songs may not present a complete pentatonic or heptatonic pitch collection (among other scale types), songs and cases of


hybrid speech-song quality present varying degrees of distinct pitch material. These range from none (speech) to some (intoned speech, where perhaps one or two distinct pitches are present) to song, where heptatonic to dodecaphonic or microtonal scales are present for the duration of a piece. List suggests that vocal practices exist in a complex continuum from speech to song in which classification of a specific practice is determined by the extent to which pitch stability and scalar structure are present and pitch variety is employed. Figure 3.1 shows List’s spectrum model for speech-to-song classification:

Figure 3.1. George List, Speech-Song Spectrum Classification Chart

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39 List, 9.
According to List’s model, speech differs from Sprechstimme due to the heightened presence of intonation in the latter style. However, List does not consider Sprechstimme to be song because it lacks pitch specificity and scalar structure. List considers Gregorian chant to be more song-like than Sprechstimme because it exhibits more pitch stability, but also more monotone because it exhibits less pitch variation. List is frustratingly unspecific in his discussion of Gregorian chant, however, and does not differentiate between highly monotone styles such as psalm and recitation tones and more ornate, melodic chant.

List’s spectrum categorization is useful in many respects because it acknowledges a complex intersection of multiple determinants in classifying speech and song, but it is also problematic in its lack of attention to rhythm, phrasing, cultural reception, perception, and issues of efficacy, signification and meaning. It is remarkable, however, that List’s brief acknowledgement of function (otherwise unaccounted for in his classification chart system) includes auctioneering:

It is apparent that other considerations than melodic type are usually operative in distinguishing one communication form from another. Distinctions made according to function rather than melodic type are also common in our own society. “Auctioneering,” the form of communication used by the auctioneer, is not usually considered “song” or even “chant.” Nevertheless, tone and the few auxiliary tones used are quite stable. On occasion, types of melodic cadences are also used.  

40 Ibid., 6.
Clearly, for List, auctioneering poses a problem. It exhibits more pitch stability and variety than some practices he deems musical but does not qualify as music because of its function. In order to argue that auctioneering is not musical, List is clearly appealing to determining factors unaccounted for in his classificatory model while disregarding the fact that auctioneers themselves commonly refer to the practice as “chant.” Since the publication of List’s article, the field of ethnomusicology has examined a wide range of practices exhibiting the type of functional integration that he identifies in auctioneering. Thus, his categorization table provides a springboard for a more inclusive and expansive system of speech-to-song classification but does not complete the task.

Beyond pitch and scalar structure, the presence of patterns, intentional structures, and form are often cited as requisite characteristics of song. Based on the theories of Mark Booth and David Burrows, auctioneering can be considered highly musical in its employment of extensive, characteristically musical repetition as a structural and communicative device. Booth specifies that song must present cadential structures of some sort or elements that delineate pattern and structural goals,41 while Burrows cites the presence of pattern and general identifiable form as requirements.42 Both note that redundancy and repetition can be seen as hallmarks of song versus speech as well. Burrows, in particular,

examines the extent to which patterned repetition is a distinct attribute of song. While speech generally features little repetition due to its communicative and dialogic function, song employs repetition frequently as a musical device (one that would stand out were it to be used in daily speech).

Each attribute discussed thus far is a type of stylization of the vocal utterance. In fact, some critics suggest that song itself can be identified specifically because it is a stylization of speech. David Burrows writes:

> Even in a spoken recitation, that is accompanied by instrumental music, as in melodrama, there is some softening of the listener’s perception of crisply verbal junctures, and a rounding and filling out of their sense of the dimensions of what they are hearing. The simplest plainsong recitation formula is as radical a stylization of speech as either Sprechgesang or tune...  

For Burrows, then, even minimal stylization of speech imparts some musical qualities to it.

Surely, in making determinations about whether a given practice is song, speech, or other, we must consider the social and cultural contexts within which the practice arises. Alan Durant, in *Conditions of Music*, indicates a binary set of concerns in the analysis of song, dividing the practice of music into “intersections between the physiological and articulatory properties of the voice on the one hand, and notions of sense and meaning on the other.” List, whose classification system prioritizes pitch and scalar issues, acknowledges that the

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social function of a practice often determines its classification as song, speech, or other, though his analytical model does not account for these components. John Kaemmer, in *Music in Human Life*, prioritizes function as highly as stylization, noting that cultures and communities often separate music (and song) from non-musical practices through the creation of the musical event.\(^4^5\) For Kaemmer, the ways in which cultures make space for song—be it physical or geographical performance space or dedicated space in time within the context of other events or behaviors—denote what is song and what is not.

To date, the melodic practices of auctioneers have received little scholarly attention; however, the limited scholarship on pitch collections and melodic gestures in auctioneering provides an important foundation for the analytical examination of melody in the auction chant by identifying the prominence of the drone pitch, the existence of additional ornamental pitches, and the possibility of scalar structure. Koenraad Kuiper addresses pitch variety in auction performance, but from a linguistic perspective. As such, he makes no attempt to transcribe actual pitch collections or melodic gestures in the majority of his work on auctioneering. In one example, he describes only the general characteristics of pitch variety employed by American east-coast antique auctioneers Douglas Bilodeau and R.G. “Dickie” Bell:

> The prosodics of the speech of these two auctioneers is a complicated matter. Both of them drone during some, but not all, of the bid-calling.

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Bilodeau begins to drone on his formula What’s your pleasure on the... The formula is droned until he gets to the lot and then there is a fall in pitch on the last stressed syllable of the last word of whatever fills the slot at the formula’s end. But although much of the bid-calling is droned, there is considerable ornamentation. For example, on a bid-calling formula such as four hundred dollars and four fifty, the first time the formula is said it may all be on a single pitch. But the second time the last word may have a higher pitch on the fif syllable and a significantly lower pitch than the tonal center of the drone on the ty syllable...46

Kuiper’s description, though not pitch-specific, does suggest that auction chants normally employ monotone and ornamental pitches. However, his discussion provides only a general description of contour and does not consider issues of pitch collection or specific ornamental or melodic structures.

Dennis Haggo and Kuiper address pitch contour in their study of New Zealand livestock auctions, citing only one specific and one general intervallic relationship as recurring ornaments. Their study identifies the minor third as a commonly recurring introductory figure at the start of a bid-call, the start of a phrase, or as an indicator of the approaching close of the sale.47 Referred to by some linguistic scholars as the “calling contour” or “stylized fall,” the

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descending minor third has received significant scholarly attention as a recurring melodic component of speech patterns across cultures. In addition to the “calling contour” of the minor third, Kuiper and Haggo note the recurrence of a “detour tune,” positioned before a break in the bid-call, wherein the auctioneer varies from the drone, producing chant “considerably higher in pitch than the preceding words.” The authors do not, however, provide more specific information about the intervallic relationship of the pitches to the drone in the detour tune, nor do they indicate the variety of “detour tones” (my term) employed within the bid-calls examined in their research.

Kuiper and Frederick Tillis do provide three brief pitch transcriptions of auction chant in their study of tobacco auctioneering, as shown in Figure 3.2. The transcriptions do not specify performers or context (such as date or location of auction), nor do the transcriptions provide text underlay. Thus, the melodic patterns can be examined only as abstracted excerpts. The examples show the prominence of a repeated pitch in each excerpt: A in the first example, F in the


49 Kuiper and Haggo, 218.
second example, and C in the third. Ornamental pitches favored are major thirds and fifths, with some passing tones in between the two.

Figure 3.2. Kuiper and Tillis, Characteristic Melodic Patterns in Tobacco Auctioneering

Though Kuiper and Tillis do not examine the characteristics of pitch collections, pitch variety, or melodic gesture in detail in the study, they do offer the most specific assessment of pitch and melody in the existing literature on auctioneering:

…all these different chants share certain identifiable characteristics…First is the use of a central pitch or tonal center of gravity which we will call the DRONE and from which there is a departure and return of other tones. Second, much of the melodic material of the chants can be related to a pentatonic scale system.\(^{50}\)

While the structural significance of the drone pitch is clear (and, indeed, is confirmed in all of the fieldwork observations and recordings conducted in my own research), the pentatonicism of the auction chant—and the tobacco auctioneer’s chant specifically—requires further consideration. Kuiper and Tillis suggest that West African and Southern American black musical culture significantly influenced both the style and structure of the tobacco auction chant, and as such, identify a musical lineage between the pentatonic-based musical systems of black cultures and the pitch collections of modern-day tobacco auctioneering. The question of pentatonicism will be discussed in more detail below, but regardless of whether we can make a definitive claim for the pentatonic nature of tobacco (or any other) auction chant, one, more general observation about pitch collection in auction chant can be gleaned from Kuiper

\(^{50}\) Kuiper and Tillis, 146.
and Tillis’ study: auction chants present a pitch collection with embedded hierarchical structures and organizing principles beyond the drone pitch.

Only two other authors have published musical transcriptions of auction chant that account for specific pitch collections. In the first, George List provides one brief transcription of a tobacco auction chant.

Figure 3.3. George List, Tobacco Auction Transcription

Source: George List, “The Boundaries of Speech and Song” _Ethnomusicology_ 7 (1963): 12.
List’s short example confirms the general pitch characteristics of tobacco chant as represented in Kuiper and Tillis’ research, with an emphasis on a drone pitch and the prominence of a major third. This example has a prominent drone on G with a secondary recurring pitch a major third above the drone and two additional pitches a major third and fourth below.

Geoffrey Miller’s study of American antiques auctioneering provides the largest collection of transcribed auction chants, with five different examples from research subjects encountered in his fieldwork. Miller’s transcriptions confirm both the prominence of the drone as the structural center of the auction chant and the common recurrence of the major third above the drone pitch, as represented in Figure 3.4, a transcription of antiques auctioneer Cal Smith. Smith’s chant presents very little pitch change, relying on only the drone and major third with no passing tone motion. Miller does account for pitch falls at the end of some phrases, and his notation suggests that the falls end on an indeterminate pitch; this effect occurred quite frequently in my field research and was often accompanied by a quick decrescendo, making any final pitch difficult to discern (if, in fact, there was an actual final pitch).

Many of Miller’s transcriptions reveal greater pitch variety than this example. In his description of another of Cal Smith’s auction chants employing more complex melodic practices, he introduces the idea that auction chant operates within a diatonic pitch collection:
Musically, a stable chant tone on E is used consistently throughout the chant section along with a well-defined collection of auxiliary pitches which can all be explained within the tonal realm of E major (i.e. the characteristic major third grace note figure beginning phrases following breath pauses).  

Miller continues to explain characteristic melodic gestures common to Cal Smith’s chant in numerous auctions, including a rise to the major third on the same word at different points in the sale, and recurring descending minor thirds and perfect fourths at the end of phrases. Miller concludes, “There is, therefore, 

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51 Miller, 192.
evidence of pitch stability and tonal scalar structure. Further, Smith’s vocal intonation in this chant is well on the way to song...placing him with List’s tobacco auctioneer between monotone and song.”

If it is indeed the case that identifiable patterns and structures may be found in the overall practice of individual auctioneers, then the next logical step in the study of melody in auctioneering would be to determine whether these patterns are common to multiple auctioneers and whether commonalities exist in specific sub-groups of auctioneers (regional, sales type, etc.). Beyond the general outlines offered by Kuiper, Haggo, Tillis, and Miller, no systematic appraisal of pitch collection has yet been undertaken. A more extensive study of pitch in auctioneering requires the consideration of a number of interrelated matters: the extent to which auctioneers maintain intonational consistency on the drone pitch, the function of the drone, the role of auxiliary pitches, and the scalar or modal character of pitch collections in auction chant. Finally, identifying common practices in regard to drone and auxiliary pitches allows us to address the question of whether pitch collections in bid-calling have harmonic implications or functions.

As part of my attempt to answer these questions, my studies at World Wide College of Auctioneering provided insights into the ways in which auctioneers understand their melodic practices and how they communicate those

52 Ibid.
practices to developing auctioneers. My fieldwork observing and recording auctions in Illinois, Colorado, Missouri, and Kentucky, and my interviews with auctioneers from around the country produced a substantial recording collection of current live auction performances and descriptions of the practice by auctioneers themselves. With the addition of the hundreds of bid-call recordings gathered from the National Auctioneers Association archives, I have been able to build a large and diverse collection of auction chants with which to undertake a systematic assessment of the musical practices employed by the performing auctioneer. My analysis of the data collected through these ethnographic projects suggests that auctioneers observe general, common “rules” regarding pitch collection and melodic gesture, though each auctioneer applies these rules with a degree of stylistic flexibility.

**The Hum: Finding Your Drone**

With the exception of high-end art and antique auctions such as those produced at Sotheby’s and Christie’s auction houses in London and New York, almost all bid-calling is performed on sung pitches, favoring a drone pitch upon which the majority of the chant is sung. While an auctioneer may return to normal speech momentarily during a sale, he is most often engaged in the chanting of specific musical pitches. These sung pitches are quite different than the formants or tonal “areas” common in normal speech. When auctioneers perform in speech mode, they often approximate specific pitches, but something very different occurs when an auctioneer makes the transition into chant mode:
in chant mode, pitch is specific, focused, and projected with the clarity and consistency of song.

In Kuiper’s model, auctioneers perform in three distinct prosodic modes: normal mode, drone mode, and shout mode. By normal mode, Kuiper means regular speech. Most often, auctioneers will perform in normal mode between sales or at a break in a sale for clarification or re-selling. Kuiper characterizes the drone mode as “relatively loud and high in pitch. It is not strictly monotonous, but the pitch range is narrow, and all nonnuclear stressed syllables are also at this pitch.”\(^{53}\) Shout mode is “also relatively loud and high and fast, but the first prominent syllable of each tone-unit—in this mode virtually always the first—is considerably louder and higher than the following syllables.”\(^{54}\) Drone mode and shout mode are considered as separate entities in Kuiper’s model, though in practice, the two are rarely audibly separable for more than a second or two. Indeed, in my own research, I have found that both the drone and shout modes are in fact sung modes, in contrast to normal mode, which is presented in regular speech. Accent patterns of similar volume exist both in Kuiper’s drone and shout modes, such that the only truly distinguishing characteristic between the two is the pitch change.

\(^{53}\) Kuiper and Haggo, 213.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
As the foundational pitch of the chant, the drone holds a special place in considerations of pitch in auctioneering. Through my ethnographic research, I attempted to discover whether there were common drone pitches employed by some or all auctioneers and how an auctioneer finds his drone. Each auctioneer has his own drone pitch, and while auctioneers may move from one drone pitch to another over the course of a long auction, most maintain the same drone through multiple sales, sometimes over the course of two to eight hours.

Auctioneer Darrell Cannon, 2004 Iowa State Auctioneer Champion and instructor at World Wide College of Auctioneering, describes the drone pitch as the “hum.” During a bid-calling drill session at World Wide, Cannon introduced the concept of the hum by explaining that each auctioneer has a comfortable pitch at which he or she is best suited to perform the bid-call. The pitch should arise from the range of the speaking voice, as Cannon describes: “You know, I always say that you should be selling in the voice that you talk in. So, if you can start saying your name, address, and phone number, and start humming from there, that’s where you should be. That’s that pitch.”

55 Cannon’s comment suggests that the auctioneer must find a comfortable center for his chant, and that this center is pitch-specific. Amy Assiter also addressed the importance of “finding” and maintaining your hum—describing the hum as the most comfortable pitch on which to chant—in a lecture on the last day of classes at World Wide.

55 Darrell Cannon, recorded phone interview by Nicole Malley, August 10, 2010.
World Wide. Assiter stressed that the hum must continue throughout the bid-call and must remain consistent between breaths. A singer herself, Assiter seemed more comfortable relating bid-calling to musical practice than most auctioneers encountered in my fieldwork. However, her discussion of the hum was not specific in terms of pitch or scale, though she did explain that the hum might shift from time to time for variety and in order to prevent the auctioneer’s voice from tiring out.

In my fieldwork, I found a striking consistency in the hum of all auctioneers. This is not to say that all auctioneers chant on the same pitch. However, once an auctioneer finds his or her hum, he or she is likely to return to it over and over again, not only during one group of sales, but over the span of hours, and even from day to day. Auctioneer Darrell Cannon states, “During the sale, there’s going to be some ups and downs, you know, just because of the salesmanship part of it, but on a level, no, you would be selling in the same hum or tone at the end that you were in the beginning.”  

Nonetheless, it is common for an auctioneer to have more than one hum pitch, but the difference between an auctioneer’s multiple hum pitches is only a matter of one to three semitones. A few examples will help to clarify the limited variety of the hum.

At a Carnival art glass auction conducted by Jim Seeck in St. Louis, Missouri, on October 2, 2010, the sale of collectible art glass brought together

56 Ibid.
collectors and buyers from around the country and resulted in the single highest-grossing Carnival auction ever to date. The auction lasted over four hours, with 290 lots, or individual items for sale. Although the sale was long, it was conducted entirely by Seeck. There were no recesses in which the auction stopped for an interlude; however, Seeck frequently broke from his chant to introduce new lots, to describe attributes of an individual piece, or to clarify goings-on in the auction. Regardless, he returned to the exact same pitch (give or take a few cents) for each chant section. At the start of the sale, Seeck’s hum pitch was a G#3. By the middle of the auction, the hum had risen about 5 cents sharp, but slowly fell back down in pitch over the remaining two hours. By the end of the auction, the hum pitch had moved down to a sharp G3, just over a quarter tone under the original starting pitch on G#3. The consistency with which Seeck maintained a hum pitch within a semitone over the course of more than four hours suggests that, whether they realize it or not, professional auctioneers rely on a very stable hum pitch on which to chant the bid-call.

My fieldwork with automobile auctioneer Paul C. Behr was an invaluable source for the study of hum establishment and consistency. Following Behr on his weekly auction schedule, I was able to observe the similarities and differences between three closely related sales over a period of days. I accompanied Behr in Denver, Colorado, for his weekly auction schedule from August 31 through September 2, 2010, to observe his work as lead auctioneer for Mannheim Auto
Auctions (known as Mannheim Colorado in Commerce City, Colorado, and Mannheim Denver in Aurora, Colorado, just outside Denver). He auctions at the Mannheim Colorado location on Tuesdays and at the Mannheim Denver location on Wednesdays and Thursdays every week. All auctions are open to car dealers only, and the marketplace serves as a sales venue for used cars (some submitted by dealers hoping to turn over or change their stock and some submitted by rental and leasing companies), and, during special factory auctions, new cars.

Over the course of the three days and almost eight total hours of auctioneering, Behr’s hum pitch varied less than a whole step from start to finish. On Tuesday, Behr auctioned for about two and a half hours, starting at 9:30 am and ending shortly before noon. His hum pitch began on an F3 and remained there for the duration of the day’s auction. By hour three, the hum had fallen about 5 cents flat, but otherwise remained unceasingly stable. On Wednesday, Behr auctioned for a little over two hours, from 9:00 to 11:00 am. His starting hum pitch for the day was E3. His E was a little sharp (in relation to the A=440 tuning system), making it rather close to the F hum pitch from the previous day. Again, he maintained this “sharp” E throughout the morning’s sale. On Thursday, Behr’s starting hum pitch remained at the “sharp” E from the morning before. Over the course of almost three hours, the hum pitch flattened slightly, to about a quarter-tone below E. The pitch character of Behr’s hum remained consistent from individual sale to individual sale, albeit with a slow flattening over a long span of time.
While the examples from Seeck’s and Behr’s auctions illustrate how the hum appears to be very consistent across both the span of an hours-long auction and from day-to-day within a given week, another example demonstrates the stability of the hum over even longer periods. Among the hundreds of auction recordings I was able to gather at the National Auctioneers Association archive, two sets of recordings proved particularly significant in my consideration of the hum. The first group of recordings is from livestock auctioneer Butch Young at two hog sales held in Lytton, Iowa, in 1979 and 1981. The 1979 recordings capture over an hour of Young’s hog sale, during which he maintained a hum pitch near A#3. Young’s pitch rose and fell between a slightly flat A#3 and a slightly sharp B3, but seemed to settle consistently around the A#3. In Young’s 1981 hog sale recordings, totaling just under an hour of bid-calling, he based his chant around an A#3 hum again. In the later example, he did temporarily rise to a slightly sharp C3, but this deviation occurred at a particularly dramatic and heated point in a very active sale, and thus, it appears that the rise in pitch coincided with, or perhaps propelled, an already intense escalation of bidding activity and competition. After Young’s brief departure from the A#3, he slowly ascended to B3, only a few cents sharp from his original (sharp) A#3 hum. Thus, the same auctioneer reveals a consistent hum pitch over the span of two years, suggesting that once established, an auctioneer may stick with the same (or very close to the same) hum pitch over a very long time span.
Auctioneers therefore display a consistent hum “area” over hours, days, months, and even decades. The National Auctioneers Association archives provided the longest time span example of hum consistency in the form of two sets of recordings by Missouri cattle auctioneer Roy Johnston. The first group of recordings includes over an hour of Johnston’s bid-calling from a 1949 cattle sale at Lakewood Farms, and the second group of recordings provide just under an hour of his 1965 cattle sale in Kearney, Missouri. In 1949, Johnston’s hum did not waver from an A#3 throughout the entirety of the day’s recordings. In 1965, Johnston maintained one hum pitch throughout the available recordings as well, though this time he hummed at a G#3. At a span of sixteen years, then, his pitch varied only a whole step. These four examples represent not only different time frames, but also different sales types (collectibles, cars and livestock) and various geographical regions. The consistency of the hum regardless of these variables suggests that a consistent pattern exists in professional auctioneering and that an auctioneer’s distinct hum is a component of his style.

The Function of the Hum and Considerations of Gender in Hum Establishment

But what purpose does the hum serve in the performance of auction chant? At the most practical level, auctioning in a hum pitch allows the

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57 While it is possible that recording technologies used to capture these performances and playback technology may have altered the pitch of a given recording, the consistency between hum pitches in these examples (taken from different recordings) suggests an overall consistency of practice.
auctioneer to use as little effort as possible for the maximum effect. The hum is an essential aspect of vocal efficiency, allowing the auctioneer to conserve his vocal resources through musical sound production. Wallace Stadtfeld, in his study on vocal care and maintenance for the professional auctioneer, states, “Professional voice users, including singers and especially auctioneers, acquire greater loudness through increased vocal efficiency.” Because vocal effort is focused on one sung pitch, the performer is able to control breathing, phrasing, and projection with less effort than is necessary with the spoken voice. Auctioneer Darrell Cannon explains, “Get that hum going, and get into the numbers. And once you’ve got in there, it’s kind of like getting on an escalator. Once you’ve got on that step, you’re there for the ride. But you’ve gotta get on that step.”

Cannon and many other instructors at World Wide College of Auctioneering frequently emphasized the importance of finding a hum pitch that was “natural.” Such a hum pitch falls in the range of the auctioneer’s regular speaking voice and does not require the auctioneer to force his or her sound. A “natural” hum pitch conserves air while auctioneering – a lesson I learned very quickly in my fieldwork as an auctioneer-in-training. At the start of the session, I


59 Cannon, interview.
was auctioneering on, or close to a D2, higher than my normal speaking range. By the end of the session, my hum pitch had moved down a fifth to a G3. During the initial days of auction school, my voice tired quickly, and I experienced significant tension in my throat. When I moved my hum pitch down, my sound became more resonant, easier to project, and caused little to no vocal strain.

Because auctioneers may perform for four or more hours in one day, the practical benefit of the hum cannot be overstated, but the aesthetic quality and function of the hum are equally important. Paul Behr comments, “certainly all auctioneers have strong points that they do very well, but I think that getting your voice set, getting a voice quality that’s easy for people to listen to, and easy on the ears, and also, from the user’s standpoint, that they can use that voice for a long time. Sometimes, we’ll sell for two hours or three hours or sometimes five or six or seven hours.”60 The practical and aesthetic purposes of the hum are closely related. Not only does the hum pitch allow for extended performance periods, but it also creates an appealing sound that will maintain the audience’s attention over long periods of time. From the listener’s perspective a pleasing hum is crucial. If an audience is subjected to a person speaking loudly and fast in a normal speaking voice for hours at a time, the effect will be that of an endless stream of yelling—a sort of verbal assault on the very audience that the auctioneer wishes to engage. Likewise, if an auctioneer performs at a hum pitch

60 Paul C. Behr, interview by Nicole Malley, Denver, Colorado, September 2, 2010.
that is exceptionally low or high in register, coupled with a forced, grating, or otherwise aesthetically unpleasant timbre, the audience may find the sound abrasive or may tire of it quickly. The hum pitch must have a specific, musically pleasing quality, as Stadtfeld describes when he states, “The auctioneer will become aware of his own personal and natural vocal sound that is spacious, with a flowing tone, having ring, and vibration.”

The hum’s pitch level is complicated when we consider gender. Male auctioneers greatly outnumber female auctioneers, and only in the past two decades have women begun to achieve the success and notoriety of their male counterparts. Like singers, male and female auctioneers have different natural ranges, and these range differences have significant ramifications in regard to the hum pitch. Instructors at World Wide College of Auctioneering addressed gender differences directly in regard to the selection of each auctioneer’s hum pitch. Women were encouraged to find low hum pitches for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Instructor Keith Saathoff encouraged female students to find a hum pitch relatively low in their range, claiming that most women’s voices are too high to listen to comfortably for a long period of time. Here, Saathoff expressed a conflation of timbre and range echoed by many auctioneers encountered in my study. While auctioneers criticize high range as a contributing factor in unpleasant female chant practice, they are often referring

61 Stadtfeld, 15.
to a combination of high range and forced timbre, most often characterized by unsupported, throaty production. Auctioneer Darrah Williams echoed this sentiment when she was asked if there is difference in quality between a female auctioneer’s chant and a male’s:

Definitely. And it’s something that women have to work on. I have a fairly deep voice, and my voice carries very well. But I don’t want to listen to some high squawky, squeaky, lilty auctioneer all day. And I think a man’s voice is deeper and much more authoritative, and so I think it just gets a much better response. So, women in the business really have to watch the fact that, you know, you don’t want to be too high, too screechy, too lilty, sing-songy, you know, you have to just really pattern yourself after a good solid chant that’s authoritative and pleasant to listen to and smooth.62

Both auctioneers indicate that lower hum pitches are more effective and aesthetically pleasing to an audience. Williams goes so far as to suggest that the male voice and vocal range are inherently better able to exert control in the auction setting, but her comments comparing the positive quality of a “deep” voice with the negative qualities of a “squawky,” “squeaky” voice also indicate that rich, supported vocal timbre is preferable to sound projected primarily from the throat and head. Considering that auctioneering has traditionally been a male-dominated profession, it might seem that such disparaging comments about a high female hum are manifestations of a gender-biased model, one which values a lower male range and timbre simply because that has been the norm throughout the history of auctioneering.

62 Darrah Williams, recorded phone interview by Nicole Malley, August 4, 2010.
Surely, the rarity of the female auctioneer and the historical bias against women auctioneers until recently have created a paradigm that privileges the male vocal range and timbre for both traditional and social reasons. However, my personal fieldwork experience suggests that there is a practical benefit to a lower range as well. The voice is better preserved, and the throat incurs a great deal less stress when producing a sustained pitch in a lower range. Likewise, the extent to which an auctioneer can support the voice from the diaphragm rather than force it from the throat determines the auctioneer’s ability to endure lengthy sales. Denise Shearin speaks to the issue of vocal stamina in regard to the site of vocal production in men and women, echoing my own observations:

I think that there is a definite difference simply because of the make-up of the female as far as the vocal cords and all of that good stuff goes, how it causes us to sound like females and not sound like men, and maybe it’s something in there. But for me, the men have a much deeper and a much richer sound to their bid styles. And, again, it varies across the board, but just in general from what I’ve heard, they’re sounding more as if they’re coming from their diaphragm whereas a lot of times with female auctioneers—and again, it could just be because of how they’re made up—their sound is more of a chesty sound to me, a higher pitched sound to me. And so I think that there are some definite characteristics that attribute to the way that the men are bid-calling, and probably even their ability to sell for long periods of time, their stamina if you will.63

63 Denise Shearin, recorded phone interview by Nicole Malley, October 6, 2010. The comments from both Shearin and Williams associating the male voice with authority are provocative to say the least, and suggest promising collaborative research could be conducted between communications, sociology, and voice studies to determine whether specific frequencies or frequency ranges do indeed have different effects on bidding audiences.
Shearin believes that technology is helping women address many of the issues associated with gender differences in vocal production, stating, “it used to be kind of a knock on women that sometimes their voice is not easy to listen to for long periods of time, but women have overcome that with P.A. systems that they tweak to certainly not sound like a man, but to be easy to listen to and that’s almost a non-issue now with women that pay attention to that.”

Neither Shearin nor instructors are World Wide suggested that women could or should use technological means to actually lower the sounding pitch of their auctioneering, but that good public address systems could be used to boost the low- and mid-ranges of an amplified voice, thus taking the “edge” off the high-end of a woman’s amplified voice.

**Pitch Collections in Auctioneering**

While no standard practice governs pitch collections in auctioneering, common patterns do exist. Table 3.1 presents the hum and auxiliary pitch collections of forty-eight auctioneers representing a variety of sales types, geographic regions, and dates. Where an auctioneer employs more than one hum pitch in different recordings or between different sales within a recording, the table provides the corresponding pitch collections for each distinct hum pitch.

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64 Behr, interview.
Table 3.1. Auctioneers’ Pitch Collections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Auction Type</th>
<th>Hum Pitch(es)</th>
<th>Auxiliary Pitches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van Adkisson</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>real estate</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>D, E, B, C#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G♭, B♭, D♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt Aumann</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>farm estate/agricultural equipment</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>C#, D#, F, A#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D♭</td>
<td>F♭, G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>B, G, G♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson Aumann</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>farm estate/agricultural equipment</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C, C#, D, A, (G#) B, C#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Assiter</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>competition</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanky Assiter</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>thoroughbred racehorse</td>
<td>E, D</td>
<td>C#, G, B, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E♭, D♭</td>
<td>C♭, A♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Bailey</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>F, A#, C#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul C. Behr</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>automobile</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E♭</td>
<td>G♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>B, C#, F#, G#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas Bilodeau (transcribed by Geoffrey Miller)</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>antiques</td>
<td>B♭</td>
<td>E♭, F, D, E♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm H. “Mac” Burnette</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>B, C#, (F), F#, G#, A, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clyde Bush</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>C, D♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Cage</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>F, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Corkle</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G♭</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F♭</td>
<td>A, A♭</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G♭</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Crisp</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>D♭, F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross Every</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>E♭, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Folks</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>D, E, A, (A♭), B, D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Gehres</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>real estate</td>
<td>F♭</td>
<td>C♭, A♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Goode</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E, F♭, C♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>Instr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Griffin</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G, (G#), A, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rufus Hansford</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>C#, D#, A#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley Hobbs</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>A#</td>
<td>C#, D, F#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fritz Hoppy</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C, A♭, B♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ham James</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>C #, E, D, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roy Johnston</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>E, F#, F#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne Kessler</td>
<td>late 1970s</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>E♭, F, B♭, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy Knapp (transcribed by Geoffrey Miller)</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>antiques</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Korney</td>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>livestock</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>B♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan Mahen</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>thoroughbred race horse</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>E♭, C, D♭, E♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Mayo</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>collectibles/ antiques</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>A♭, C♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Merritt</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>auction house</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>A♭, C♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archie Moody (transcribed by Geoffrey Miller)</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>antiques (best known as a livestock auctioneer)</td>
<td>F#</td>
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<td>livestock</td>
<td>E</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lee Riggs</td>
<td>1940s/1950s</td>
<td>tobacco</td>
<td>B♭</td>
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<td>A♭</td>
<td>F, C, E♭</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1969</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>B, E, D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim Seeck</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>collectibles/ antiques</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A#, E#, G, G#</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Sims</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cal Smith</td>
<td>1981</td>
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<td>(transcribed by Geoffrey Miller)</td>
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<td>Aaron Stockton</td>
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<td></td>
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Note: The chart represents auctions recorded in my fieldwork, collected from the National Auctioneers Association archives, online videos, and the transcribed auction chants of Koenraad Kuiper, Dennis Haggo, Frederick Tillis, Geoffrey Miller, and George List. When an auctioneer utilizes an auxiliary pitch an octave above or below the hum pitch, that octave has been included as an auxiliary pitch. Pitches in parentheses are always used as neighbors to the primary auxiliary pitch a half-step above or below.
In only one case—that of Spanky Assiter—do we find two hum pitches utilized in the same sale. This chart does not attempt to provide an account of all pitch collections used by each auctioneer, as the data here results from the study of selected recordings. Auctioneers may use more or fewer pitches on different days, so the snapshot that each recording allows represents only one auction and one day. This data does allow us to examine commonalities between auctions, without purporting to be a comprehensive account of all pitches utilized by an auctioneer throughout his or her career.

While most auctioneers utilize collections of two to four pitches, some use up to eight different pitches in a single sale. There is no apparent correlation between sales type and pitch variety, nor do particularly large or small pitch collections appear in certain historical periods. Rather, the variety of pitches employed by an auctioneer can be understood best as an aspect of personal style (as discussed in chapter 6). The data suggests, then, that we must look for general characteristics governing pitch collection in auction chant. Across the

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65 While some auctioneers do change from one hum pitch to another, Spanky Assiter is the only auctioneer encountered in my research who alternates between two hum pitches in a single chant. It is common for an auctioneer to move the hum pitch up or down a half or whole step for effect or to protect the voice from exhaustion, but when this happens, auctioneers generally remain in the new hum pitch for the rest of the chant or for the rest of the sale. Assiter, however, shifts between two hum pitches throughout individual sales, and as such, I characterize his chant as having a dual-hum style.
spectrum of sales types, and over a period of many decades, are there any patterns in the pitch data?

Kuiper and Tillis suggest that, at least in the case of tobacco auctioneering, auctioneers employ pentatonic pitch collections in their chant. Thirty-five of the sixty-eight pitch collection examples above can be classified as pentatonic subsets, though few examples include the entire pentatonic set. In most cases where non-pentatonic pitches appear in an auctioneer’s pitch collection, the chromatic pitches are employed briefly or in strictly ornamental manners. As such, these pitches are often secondary to the pitches emphasized and repeated the most in the chant. For example, the C-natural in Kuiper and Tillis’s first tobacco chant example occurs only once and appears to be a momentary deviation from the “goal” of the C#. Likewise, all of the chromatic pitches in Kurt Aumann’s chant occur infrequently, and often function as ornaments or passing tones to the pitches fitting into the pentatonic collection. Thus, Kuiper and Tillis’s characterization of auction chant as pentatonic in nature seems to bear some weight. Where non-pentatonic pitches appear in their examples, the pentatonic collection is clearly emphasized, with any chromatic pitches functioning as secondary to the primary pentatonic pitches. Many of the auctioneers studied in my own research display the same pentatonic emphasis with only occasional use of auxiliary chromatic pitches.

Melodic structures employing conjunct linear motion are extremely uncommon; rarely do auctioneers chant more than two pitches in consecutive
scalar order. Rather, auxiliary pitches are most often reached by intervallic leaps away from the hum pitch and are followed by a quick return to the hum pitch. It is uncommon to hear an auctioneer stay away from the hum pitch for more than two or three notes at the very most. Thus, pitch collections in auctioneering are best understood in regard to their relation to the hum pitch. The hum is the center of the chant, not unlike a fulcrum, but the concept of a pitch fulcrum is quite different than the idea of a tonic pitch in Western musical practice. The hum is indeed a sort of “home” pitch, but the chant leaps away from and back to the hum pitch, balanced, as it were, by the fulcrum function of the hum. The primacy of the hum pitch is established neither through linear motion nor pitch hierarchy, but by sheer repetition and return. As a result, the hum pitch is both the most prominent pitch in the auction chant, and it is also the point of constant return from any auxiliary pitches.

Pitch collections used by auctioneers are sets of pitches related by polarity to the hum pitch, and these collections favor specific intervallic relationships between the hum and its auxiliary pitches. Certain pitch intervals are used with such frequency among auctioneers of different types and from a range of dates that they indicate a rough standard of practice in regard to intervallic gestures. When common interval patterns are examined, they, in turn, can account for the largely major modal character in auction chant, achieved through emphasis on the intervals found within the pentatonic pitch collection.
Pentatonicism in auctioneering arises from the fundamental intervallic relationships common among chants of different performers. While some auctioneers use extremely chromatic pitch collections, most pitches can be accounted for from the following list of intervallic relationships to the hum pitch:

1. a major third above
2. a perfect fifth above
3. a minor third below
4. a perfect fourth below
5. an octave above

The majority of the pitches appearing in Table 3.1 bear one of these relationships to the hum pitch. Condensed into one octave, presented in scalar order, and including the hum pitch, the intervals listed above create a pentatonic scale without the second degree (one whole-step above the root). Few auctioneers employ all five of the pitches listed above, but most auction chant pitches can be accounted for from this list, with the exception of chromatic ornamental pitches leading directly to one of the five primary pitches.

By far, the most common interval utilized by auctioneers is the interval of the third. While the majority of third relationships to the hum are major thirds above the hum pitch, some auctioneers do use a rising minor third. Kuiper and Haggo find that the minor third is a particularly common interval in livestock auctioneering in New Zealand, but based on my research data, it seems likely that this intervallic pattern is specific to that region, as it is not a common feature
of North American livestock auctioneering. As shown in Table 3.1, livestock auctioneers commonly employ a rising major third relationship in their bid-calls. In fact, for many livestock auctioneers, the entire chant may be built upon only this interval and no other. The minor third relationship has appeared in my research, but most often as an interval below the hum pitch.

The major and minor third relations in bid-calling are complicated by an intonational practice common to many auctioneers. It is quite common to find the major third above the hum pitch performed slightly flat in comparison to the equal temperament system. One could argue that this pitch is, in fact, a slightly sharp minor third, however the “out-of-tune” pitch is normally slightly closer in proximity to the major third than the minor third, meaning that it is only slightly flat versus being quite sharp.\(^66\) It is also possible that auctioneers are observing a just intonation system (albeit unintentionally), in that the third is tuned to the hum pitch slightly flat in comparison to the equal temperament system.

Auctioneers Peter Gehres, Ken Troutt, Malcolm H. “Mac” Burnette, Charlie Folks, and Page Roberts all use the flattened third above the hum pitch regularly in their chant, while a number of auctioneers in my research only occasionally flatten the third, suggesting that the practice is not specific to one type of sale nor to one region (these five auctioneers represent various Southern and Midwestern

\(^66\) My interpretation of pitch in this instance is also informed by jazz practice, wherein a blue note is always understood to be a flattened pitch.
states). While the scope of the current study does not attempt to posit historical or stylistic connections between musical styles and auctioneering, the practice of flattening the major third does occur in both American blues and jazz and a number of non-Western musical traditions. The connections between auctioneering and these folk, vernacular, and popular styles—if, in fact, a connection exists—remains to be studied.

**Pitch-Specific Gestures**

The hum pitch is the heart of the auctioneer’s melodic practice, and the majority of the chant is performed on it. When an auctioneer chooses to deviate from the hum and disrupt the familiar sound of the chant, he does so with specific purpose and with identifiable gestural structures that, though often characteristic of an individual auctioneer’s style and practice, indicate moments of special emphasis, change, or drama in the sale. In relation to their position within the structure of the bid-call, melodic gestures in auctioneering are of three types: opening, closing, and idiosyncratic inner gestures. These three types are distinct, such that gestures used in one of the three positions in the chant will not, with rare exceptions, be used in either of the other two; that is to say that opening melodic gestures are unique to the beginning of a sale and will not be heard later during the chant.  

Likewise, closing gestures are saved specifically

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67 Very rarely, an auctioneer’s opening gesture will recur in the sale. The majority of auctioneers who utilize opening gestures rely on one or two distinct melodic phrases reserved only for the start of the chant. In cases where the first melodic gesture recurs later in the chant, the function is slightly different in that
for the end of the sale, and idiosyncratic inner gestures are utilized only within the ongoing chant.

An auctioneer may or may not employ all three types of gestures in his chant, depending on his personal style. All auctioneers employ inner gestures, and these comprise the majority of the auctioneer’s melodic gestural practice. Opening gestures are less common due to the fact that some auctioneers speak the first bid request(s) or start the bid-call immediately without any special introductory melodic figure. Likewise, many auctioneers will speak rather than chant the final words of a sale. Opening and closing gestures do not appear to be related; an auctioneer who employs an opening melodic gesture may not employ a closing one and vice versa.

Melodic gestures used within the body of the chant are characterized as idiosyncratic because they are products of an auctioneer’s personal style. Inner gestures usually comprise no more than three auxiliary pitches, as it is uncommon for an auctioneer to depart from the hum pitch for more than one or two notes in the chant at a time. Although inner gestures may appear at any point in a chant, they usually occur at similar structural points, either at the

it can serve as a phrase opener for new phrases throughout the chant. In such instances, the beginning of the chant is treated like a new phrase, and as such, may incorporate the phrase-opening gesture. Generally, though, the beginning of the chant is treated as a special structural moment worthy of its own special melodic gesture.
beginning of phrases (after a pause or breath) or at the end of phrases (preceding a pause or breath).

With one exception, auction type is not a determinant of melodic gestural practice. Livestock auctioneers, for example, are no more or less likely to use opening melodic gestures than automobile auctioneers. The only exception to this occurs with tobacco auctioneering. Because all aspects of tobacco auctioneering are more strictly and predictably stylized than other auction types, it is correspondingly more common to find both opening and closing melodic gestures used by tobacco auctioneers. Tobacco auctioneer Bob Cage chants a descending minor triad to open his sale, creating a distinct musical statement to mark the beginning of his performance:

Example 3.1. Bob Cage, 1st Annual Tobacco Auctioneer Championship, Opening Melody

Source: Bob Cage, *1st Annual Tobacco Auctioneer Championship*, audio recording, Archives of the National Auctioneers Association.
The melodic gesture serves two purposes for Cage: first, it acts as a formal device providing a clear beginning to the musical performance of the bid-call. Second, it establishes the pitch collection with which Cage will perform the sale. The ensuing chant is based on a hum pitch of A♭ and uses only one auxiliary pitch: the C positioned a major third above the hum pitch. Cage’s opening melodic gesture anchors the hum pitch by creating an intervallic pivot around it, bounded by the major third above and the minor third below. While the chord created by the melodic gesture is an F-minor chord, it would be incorrect to think of F as the foundational pitch of the structure or of the chant that follows. Indeed, the opening melodic figure is the only point in the chant where the F actually appears. The melodic gesture reflects the common pitch practice of many auctioneers who use the minor third below and the major third above a hum pitch as the two opposing points of the “pitch fulcrum” discussed above. Cage’s opening melodic gesture, then, sets up the primacy of the A♭ by presenting a melodic figure that is itself a condensed representation of an auction-specific form of “tonicization,” wherein the center of the pitch fulcrum is established by the surrounding intervals of the major and minor third.

Perhaps the most famous closing melodic gesture in auctioneering is that of L.A. “Speed” Riggs. As spokesperson for Lucky Strike Cigarettes for many years, Riggs gained international renown as a tobacco auctioneer, and his chant became a common sound on radio and television advertisements throughout the
country. At the completion of all sales in which the American Tobacco Company was the winning bidder, Riggs employed the same closing melodic gesture (Example 3.2). Riggs’ hum pitch for the chant is A, and thus, the closing melodic gesture provides a satisfying melodic cadence on the hum pitch, here presented as the root of a major triad. The E appears at no other point in the chant, and the C♯ appears only one other time, in the opening melodic gesture.

Example 3.2. L.A. “Speed” Riggs, Closing Melodic Gesture


In Example 3.3, Riggs’ opening melodic gestures for two different chants feature different hum pitches (A and B♭). Both chants use the opening gesture to establish the hum pitch by a whole step ascent to the major third above the hum and then a leap down to the hum. Although Riggs’ opening gesture does not use the pitch fulcrum, the musical purpose is quite similar to that of Bob Cage’s opening gesture both in the way that it marks the commencement of the musical
performance and establishes the hum pitch in relation to one or more auxiliary pitches.

Example 3.3. L.A. “Speed” Riggs - Opening Melodic Gestures


In both of Riggs’ opening gestures, the major third above the hum pitch helps to establish relationships between the hum and auxiliary pitches, and the gesture itself provides the pitch collection with which the auctioneer will conduct the sale.

Idiosyncratic inner gestures can appear virtually anywhere in the chant, but the most common appearances occur at the beginning and ending of phrases preceding and following pauses for breath. Phrase-opening gestures take a variety of forms depending on an auctioneer’s personal style. Auctioneer Roy Johnston uses the same opening gesture repeatedly in his chant (Example 3.4).
Example 3.4. Roy Johnston, Denver Stock Show, 1963 (excerpt)

The gesture is comprised of a leap down to the hum pitch A from the F# a major sixth above, represented here in Example 3.4, mm.4-5, 21-22, and 32-33. The major sixth above the hum is not a common interval used in auctioneer’s pitch collections, but it is common to Johnston’s melodic style and is repeated frequently both within individual sales and among many different sales. Although this interval is not common in auctioneers’ pitch collections, it can be understood within the common pitch practice of auctioneers when it is understood as a minor third (one of the most common intervals used below the hum pitch) transposed up an octave. The wide leap provides excitement, melodic variety, and momentum for launching back into the chant after a pause.

Closing gestures function in a similar manner to opening gestures in that they provide musical repetition and continuity for both the auctioneer and listener. These gestures create musical closure for internal phrases within the chant and establish a predictable musical structure with which listeners can become familiar. The most frequently encountered phrase-closing gesture found in my research is that of the descending minor third followed by the descending whole step. This gesture can be seen above in the example from Roy Johnston (mm. 4 and 31), and also in the following example from livestock auctioneer Paul Goode (Example 3.5, mm. 6, 15, 20 and 24).
Example 3.5. Paul Goode, Angus Cattle Sale

\[ \begin{align*}
  I'm at five seven-ty five now six hun-dred. & \quad I'm at \\
  five seven-ty five now six hun-dred wan-na buy 'er? & \quad I'm at \\
  five seven-tyfive gonn-a make you buy 'er on a six! & \quad I'm at \\
  six hun-dred on 'er now a quart-er? & \quad I'm at six hun-dred dol-lar, bid a quart-er now a quart-er dol-lar \\
  Will you wan-na buy a quart-er? & \quad Will you wan-na buy a quart-er now, quart-er now \quad Will you wan-na buy a quart-er? & \quad I'm at six hun-dred dol-lar now a quart-er on 'er buy 'er \\
  sold 'er down there. & \quad Six hun-dred dol-lar.
\end{align*} \]

Source: Paul Goode, Tolan Angus Cattle Sale, audio recording, recorded November 27, 1953, Archives of the National Auctioneers Association.
Goode also uses the gesture to close both individual phrases and the whole sale, but this use is yet another phrase-closing gesture, rather than a distinct chant-closing gesture. Goode’s phrase-closing gesture is common among livestock auctioneers, but similar gestures can also be found in automobile, real estate, agricultural, and personal property auction chants. The gesture is pentatonic in character, particularly when paired with one or more additional pentatonic pitches in the chant. In the example below, Goode’s use of the C# as an auxiliary pitch, along with the pitches included in the phrase-closing gesture, provides all but one member of the pentatonic pitch collection. Moreover, the common closing gesture leaves the chant “hanging” on the fifth above (or in this case inverted below) the hum pitch. Although melodic practice in the chant cannot be characterized as tonal per se, this cadential gesture does suggest a degree of pitch hierarchy such that a return to the hum pitch provides a level of musical satisfaction for the listener. However, when Goode ends the entire chant on the fifth, are we unlikely to hear this as a point of closure? The conclusion on the fifth actually acts as yet another phrase-closer. Goode soon begins the next chant, and the use of the closing gesture here at the end of one sale creates the same sense of musical expectation for the start of the next sale as it does between phrases in the chant itself.

The melodic practice of the auctioneer can be understood as one in which basic, shared characteristics of pitch collection, pitch relationships, and melodic
gestures vary in type and degree of use based on personal style and, to a lesser extent, on auction type. An auctioneer, having found his hum, creates a melodic style wherein a limited number of auxiliary pitches offer opportunities for musical variety and mark structural points within the chant itself. Pitch collections often bear resemblance to or create subsets of pentatonic and major scales, but cannot be considered scalar due to the special quality of pitch fulcrums common to auctioneers’ pitch practice. The song of the auction, then, can be understood best by its own rules, hierarchical structures, gestural practices, and by the ways in which each auctioneer makes the chant his own.
CHAPTER 4

A SALE YOU CAN DANCE TO: THE RHYTHMIC PRACTICES OF THE AUCTIONEER

The Denver Mannheim dealer automobile auctions offer a sound experience unlike any I have known. At times, six or more lanes of auctions run simultaneously. The auction is held in a long garage, with cars moving through the separate lanes every one to two minutes. Each lane is devoted to a particular make of car or seller (the Chrysler lane, the Infiniti lane, the Enterprise Car Rental lane, etc.) and features more than fifty cars an hour. One by one, cars roll in, pause during the auction, and proceed through the other end of the garage. Buyers walk between lanes and around vehicles to inspect them, creating multiple streams of motion between bidders, automobiles, and ringmen. In every lane, an auctioneer sits in a booth elevated above the buyers and ringman, bid-calling with a microphone and amplification system; thus, a polyphony of auction chants emanate from speakers throughout the long open space of the sales floor. Sound and motion create an ordered chaos capable of facilitating hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales in three to four hours.

Walking between lanes, observing each auctioneer’s individual style, and hearing the layers of amplified chants morph and change as I moved from one end of the sales floor to the other, I was immediately struck by the polyrhythmic and polymetric effect of so many auction chants broadcast simultaneously in one
space. Having spent months training in the skills of auctioneering and observing hours of auctions around the country, I found the rapid rhythmic gestures of each auctioneer to be a constant point of fascination for me. Experiencing the Mannheim auction’s mesmerizing soundscape magnified my awareness of the complex rhythmic language of the auctioneer. Out of all cacophony, distinct and identifiable rhythms emerged from the sound mass. The recurrence of a familiar rhythm started to ground me, allowing me to separate the jumbled layer of chants out into individual musical lines. Hypnotic in their combined effect, each maintained its own identity due largely to the rhythmic patterns performed by each auctioneer.

Nowhere was the importance of rhythm in auctioneering more apparent to me in my fieldwork than at these car sales. Second perhaps to speed, bidders and auctioneers most often cite the exciting rhythms of the auctioneer as fundamental to the practice. What exactly comprises the rhythmic language of the auctioneer? The following consideration of rhythm in auctioneering will draw from the limited secondary literature on the subject, ethnographic and interview material collected during my fieldwork, and musical transcriptions of representative auction chants to both clarify and specify issues of rhythmic pattern and gesture.

Rhythm, as understood by auctioneers themselves, holds special meaning specific to the bid-call performance. In particular, tempo and patterned groupings of pulse are central to auctioneers’ musical values and aesthetic
assessments of good rhythmic practice, while individual rhythmic gestures receive little critical attention from them. While the rapid-fire rhythmic declamation of numbers and filler words is the aspect of auctioneering most often admired and puzzled over by audience members, the auctioneer’s flexible treatment of meter—unexamined in previous studies of auctioneering—reveals a sophisticated rhythmic practice that both responds to and helps shape audience behavior during the sale.

**Rhythm in the abstract: pulse and meter**

Discussing rhythm in auctioneering is complicated by the various and often conflicting uses of the term within the profession. At auction school rhythm was, by far, the most frequently invoked musical term, but each instructor seemed to have a different concept of the word and its meaning in regard to the practice of auctioneering. These meanings tended to emphasize two different interpretations: 1) pulse and/or meter and 2) specific rhythmic patterns. In addition to these two uses of the term, the concept of rhythm (in either form) was often conflated with concepts of pitch and speed.

According to World Wide President Paul Behr, “chant is rhythm and numbers.”

At World Wide, instructors frequently referred to the importance of “good rhythm” in the auction chant. When a student’s chant was choppy or started and stopped too much, he was often reproached for “breaking rhythm,”

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1 Paul C. Behr, class presentation for World Wide College of Auctioneering, field notes collected by Nicole Malley, June 12, 2010.
by which instructors meant that the steady pulse of the chant was disrupted.

This use of the word rhythm referred to the pulse stream of the chant, not specific rhythmic figures or patterns. From the start, this concept of rhythm as pulse was developed in both technical exercises and drill sessions.

In introducing “daily dozens” exercises to the students on the first day of class, Behr explained that, “tongue twisters create rhythm.” 2 Here, Behr used rhythm as a general or abstract term meaning consistent pulse. Each of the daily dozen exercises were to be performed in steady tempo and recurring patterns of accent. On the first few days of the session, instructors would emphasize the steady pulse with head nods or by beating time with their hands, and many students picked up on this behavior, moving in time with the exercises to accentuate the pulse stream.

While the exercises do introduce a limited variety of rhythmic figures, the majority of the drills feature only strings of eighth notes with little or no syncopation. Thus, when Behr discusses the role of the daily dozens in terms of the pedagogy of rhythm, he means that the exercises help students in the development of a steady beat and consistent tempo, not that the exercises introduce a range of specific rhythmic patterns to broaden a student’s rhythmic vocabulary.

2 Ibid.
More specifically, though, the abstract concept of rhythm as articulated by auctioneers and World Wide instructors indicates a specific organization of beats in the steady pulse stream of the auction chant. The tongue twister drills overwhelmingly emphasize duple meter (including tongue twisters three and six, which are both in compound duple meter). Only two exceptions—exercises seven and eight (“Woodchuck” and “Betty Botter”)—introduce one 3/4 measure into the otherwise duple meter structure. (Example 4.1 provides transcriptions of all eight tongue twisters.)

On the World Wide College of Auctioneering Tongue Twisters and Number Scales Instructional Sheet, exercises five and eight—“Engine Engine No. 9” and “Betty Botter”—are identified as the best examples for “creating rhythm” and “developing rhythm and flow to a chant.” Based on the transcriptions above, these two exercises exhibit the least amount of rhythmic variety in the collection (with the possible exception of number four, “Rubber Baby Buggy Bumper”). Rather, a steady pulse organized into a consistent meter serves as the pedagogical basis for both exercises. “Betty Botter” expands on the rhythmic lesson of “Engine Engine No. 9” by adding one alternate meter in the middle of the chant, but otherwise, both serve to teach students about the establishment and maintenance of a pulse and meter.

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3 World Wide College of Auctioneering, “Tongue Twisters and Number Scales: The Daily Dozen Drills to a Successful Chant” (instructional worksheet). See Appendix I for a copy of the complete practice sheet.
Example 4.1. Tongue Twister Exercises

No. 1: The Big Brown Bug

The big brown bug bit a big brown bear. The big brown bug bit a big brown bear. (The)

No. 2: Tommy Attatimus

Tom-m-y At-ta-ti-mus took two T's, tied them to the top of two tall trees.

No. 3: The Handle/Hammer

The handle goes up and the hammer comes down. The handle goes up and the hammer comes down. (The)

No. 4: Rubber Baby Buggy Bumper

Example 4.1 Continued

No. 5: Engine Engine #9

No. 6: Around the Ruff & Rugged Rock

No. 7: Woodchuck
Example 4.1 Continued

No. 8: Betty Botter


Note: All tongue twister transcriptions have been written with a hum pitch of G (the author’s hum pitch) for consistency among examples. The parenthetical B in the first measure of Tongue Twister No. 2 indicates that it appears occasionally as the starting pitch of the exercise, though the G appears most frequently. In World Wide College’s *Auctioneering Practice Training CD*, Behr alternates the opening pitch of the chant, favoring the G, but starting some repetitions of the exercise on the B. In Tongue Twister No. 7, the 3/4 measure could also be expressed in 9/8. I have chosen 3/4 because it best expresses the consistency of the pulse between the meter shifts. Switching to 9/8 would require the equation of the quarter and dotted-quarter durations resulting in more complicated notation that would fail to capture the primacy of the pulse as the rhythmic foundation of the chant exercise.
Auctioneer and World Wide instructor Amy Assiter offered further evidence that “rhythm” in auctioneering is code for steady pulse in her class presentation on the fundamentals of the bid-call, where she emphasized the use of a metronome for practice. Assiter asserted that a metronome “evens out rhythm,” urging students to use it in the same way that musicians use the tool to develop an internal sense of musical time and tempo. This musical sense of time facilitates tempo control during the auction, where the speed of the pulse rarely deviates from an established tempo.

As articulated by auctioneers, the concept of rhythm is strongly connected to the function of filler words as well, and it was not uncommon to hear instructors at World Wide and auctioneers in my fieldwork relate the two terms. Auctioneer Nelson Aumann states, “You need to create a good rhythm. It’s important. And to create that rhythm, of course, you need to have a chant and filler words to make that flow smoothly.” Auctioneer Jim Seeck echoes Aumann’s comment when he states, “Filler words are something used to keep you in a rhythm maybe….It’s about rhythm. I think the filler word is just something to try to help you stay in a rhythm.” Both auctioneers illustrate a

4 Amy Assiter, class presentation, for World Wide College of Auctioneering, field notes collected by Nicole Malley, June 19, 2010

5 Nelson Aumann, interview by Nicole Malley, Nokomis, IL, November 24, 2010.

6 Seeck, interview.
crucial component of the construction of the auction chant, and in particular, its rhythmic character. If the auction chant is supposed to be fluid, continuous, tempo-consistent, and metrically organized, then filler words serve an important function beyond their role in the discourse structure (as discussed in chapter 2). Without filler words, bid-calling would consist merely of a string of numbers. Such a chant would be monotonous, and little sense of metric organization would exist, particularly in jumps between numbers of different rhythmic and durational character. For example, a chant without filler words might organize into a duple meter at “ninety dollars, ninety dollars, ninety dollars, etc.,” but the meter would shift to triple at “one hundred dollars, one hundred dollars, one hundred dollars.”

Filler words allow the auctioneer to maintain tempo and meter regardless of the changing increments and the inclusion of different questions and prompts in the chant. One-syllable filler words such as “now,” “here,” and “bid” (some of the most commonly used filler words across all styles and types of auctions) serve two primary functions in the bid-call. First, they contribute to the continuous flow of the chant by interjecting eighth and sixteenth notes between the numbers or question words in the chant. Second, filler words allow the auctioneer to fit the number/bid information into the established meter by filling out the measure. When auctioneers refer to fillers words’ function in smoothing out the chant or helping the auctioneer stay in rhythm, they are describing the manner in which filler words supplement, complete, and maintain the chant’s
metrical organization (or “rhythm,” in the parlance of the auction profession).

Example 4.2 illustrates how an auctioneer might chant a basic transition between five and six dollar bids. The first example does not use filler words between the two statements, while the second example inserts one-word fillers, as is common practice in auctioneering. In the second example, we see that the filler words eliminate the space left at the end of measures one and two in the first example, thus maintaining a sense of rhythmic momentum and continuous declamation. At the same time, these filler word insertions literally fill out the measure, supplementing the rhythmic material created by the basic chant information.

Example 4.2. Filler Word Examples

Denise Shearin explains the relationship between filler words and rhythm when she states, “When I practice sometimes, I mean, just have a filler word come out that was not intended, but it just kind of happened in that moment and it fit the
rhythm, and it fit what I was doing at the time.” Shearin’s notion of fit is key here, as it characterizes filler words as rhythmic units which align with the established pulse and meter and allow the auctioneer to convey the ever-changing information of the ongoing sale in a way that conforms to the large-scale rhythmic organization of the chant.

When a filler word fits, it allows the auctioneer to seamlessly move between numbers and bid requests without breaking either the pulse or the meter. Geoffrey Miller describes this function when he states, “The auctioneer’s formulas are the ‘filler words,’ … These formulas allow the auctioneer to fill in the gaps between the pulses created by the natural prosody of the numbers.” Miller expresses a similar idea to Shearin’s, that the filler word fits into a pre-existing large-scale beat pattern and facilitates the continuation of that pattern.

The established pattern within which filler words fit is not inflexible. It would be inaccurate to claim that all auction chant remains in one meter for the duration of the sale or that filler words are used only to maintain an established meter (although in some rare instances auctioneers do, in fact, fit all rhythms, filler words, and number changes into a single meter). The tongue twister exercises, which exhibit almost uniformly consistent meter, are not indicative of the common metric practice in real sales situations. Pulse groupings normally

7 Shearin, interview.

8 Miller, “‘Are You All Unhappy at a Twenty Dollar Bill?’,” 202. Miller’s use of the word “formula” differs slightly from the one developed in chapter 6.
vary between only two or three different meters during a sale, and the pulse itself is almost always stable in auction chant. The auctioneer is practiced in making some accommodations for meter shifts, but filler words allow the auctioneer to fit many different types of information into one of a small number of metric patterns. Without the mediating role of the filler word as a sort of rhythmic placeholder, the auctioneer would frequently encounter situations where the rhythms of numbers and statements or questions would result in odd meters.

Rhythmic Patterns: The Building Blocks of the Auction Chant

When World Wide College of Auctioneering instructor Wayne Pals defines chant as “numbers plus rhythms,” he uses the term rhythm in a very different way than the cases mentioned above. The plural form of the word suggests not an overarching sense or structure, but rather a collection of individual structures. These structures, as employed in the auction chant, comprise an auctioneer’s rhythmic vocabulary. Each auctioneer’s collection of rhythmic patterns differs based on sales type and personal style, constituting a predominantly formulaic approach to the employment of rhythmic gestures (discussed in chapter 6), but we can identify some general characteristics of rhythmic patterns and the variety of patterns utilized by auctioneers.

9 Wayne Pals, class discussion, World Wide College of Auctioneering, field notes collected by Nicole Malley, June 17, 2010.
When World Wide College of Auctioneering instructor Darrell Cannon explains that “good rhythm makes the chant sounds fast,” he means two different, but related things.\textsuperscript{10} If we consider rhythm as it is commonly invoked in auctioneers’ descriptions of the practice, then his comment suggests that steady tempo and metric organization of the pulse create a sense of speed by fitting the continuous chant into an unceasing stream of beats and rhythmic subdivisions of the beat. At the same time, I understand him to mean that the internal rhythmic figures of the chant—those subdivisions of the beat that provide variety within the monotonous progression of the pulse—also aid in the perception of speed. Filler words, in particular, provide the auctioneer with the opportunity to introduce a variety of individual rhythmic gestures to break up the pulse stream. Any time a filler word subdivides the beat (represented in my auction transcriptions as eighth or sixteenth note figures), the effect is one of momentarily increased speed. Paired with the fast tempos of the bid-call, any rhythmic gesture that further divides the beat contributes to an overall effect of temporary diminution.

Beyond speed, rhythmic gestures provide musical contrast within the chant. Denise Shearin explains, “…the filler words are just that. They’re there in order to create some rhythm in your bid-calling style because rhythm makes it exciting as well. I mean, I like to hear a rhythmic auctioneer. I like it. I mean I

like to be able to tap my toe to it, you know. That keeps me engaged.”

Shearin, like Cannon, refers to two different characteristics of rhythm, indicating that rhythm is both exciting and engaging. Individual rhythmic gestures are exciting because they provide variety within the pulse stream, but the more general meaning of the word rhythm relates to power of steady tempo and pulse to engage the listener, as manifested physically in the tapping of the toe.

Individual rhythmic patterns and gestures in auctioneering are relatively simple, brief, and usually characterized by small patterns dividing the beat into eighth or sixteenth notes. The discrete rhythmic figures utilized by auctioneers were never addressed at World Wide College of Auctioneering and my sense was that auctioneers were supposed to develop a rhythmic language through repeated practice, setting the text of the bid-call to rhythms that most closely approximated the natural prosodic rhythms of normal speech. Only in rare situations do auctioneers employ rhythms that elongate or otherwise distort the natural, spoken rhythm of a word. For example, auctioneers will use triplet divisions, but only in special situations where such rhythmic emphasis achieves the effect of temporary deceleration. Additionally, syncopation is extremely rare and most auctioneers do not employ any syncopation at all. Auctioneers emphasize the pulse by anchoring all rhythms to it. Further, the metrical style is

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11 Shearin, interview.
downbeat oriented as well. Thus on both the pulse and metrical levels, rhythms are generally front-loaded, with emphasis on strong beats and downbeats. This approach to rhythm is common among auctioneers of all styles and historic periods encountered in my fieldwork and archival research.

**Entrainment and Referential Meter**

The auctioneer faces the same challenges as all improvising musicians who strive to construct fluid, logical ideas within an often-shifting musical environment. For the auctioneer, the element of change is the receipt of bids from the audience. When new bid information arrives from the audience, the auctioneer must be poised to jump to the next bid increment as soon as he receives it. There is no way to know how the bids will arrive or with what frequency, yet the auctioneer’s task is to integrate increment increases into his chant in as seamless a manner as possible. Thus, he must create a reliable, comfortable chant, but one which is flexible enough to be changed at any moment without disrupting the musical flow of time.

If one of the primary goals of the auction chant is the creation of a specifically musical space within which the exchange of goods can take place,

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12 In referring to metric organization as downbeat-oriented, I am, of course, recontextualizing the auctioneer’s musical practice to some extent. Because bid-calling is an improvised practice in which the performers themselves rarely consider their practice a musical one, auctioneers are not consciously thinking in terms of Western notational models or measures. For the purposes of depicting auction chant in musical notation, however, it becomes clear that rhythmic emphasis favors strong beats on both the micro and macro levels.
then both fluidity and continuity are key. The auctioneer cannot stop and start with each new bid without undermining the very nature of the practice itself, the ongoing, rhythmic chant which elevates the auctioneer’s practice from regular or even stylized speech into musical performance. While many auctioneers describe the use of silence or complete stoppage of the auction chant as a possible strategic device for inciting competition or pressure (discussed in chapter 5), the normal state for the auction chant is one of constant musical motion. Auctioneer Peter Gehres comments, “Any time you stop saying things, even if it’s just for a second between 25...25...25, that little gap in there, accumulated, it’s a killer.”

Bid information may come to the auctioneer in the form of a raised paddle, a nod, a hand gesture, or any of a number of other bid indicators employed by audience members, and each indicator must be recognized and acted on without breaking the established chant. Bidders will rarely signal a bid in time with the auctioneer’s chant, and, as a result, the beginning auctioneer frequently trips up in the process of attempting to integrate the bid information into it. If, for example, a student has established a steady duple meter chant, how does he seamlessly integrate a bid received 5/7ths of the durational distance between beats one and two? The bidding information that the auctioneer receives visually may not fit into the rhythm and meter of the chant being

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13 Peter Gehres, recorded phone interview by Nicole Malley, August 22, 2010. Gehres is an instructor at the Reppert Auction School in Auburn, Indiana and is the 2010 Michigan State Auctioneering Champion and the 2011 Indiana Auction Champion.
performed, and the cognitive dissonance between the timing of the bid(s) and the rhythm of the chant caused me and other students to pause our chant entirely, reorient ourselves to the new increment we needed to call and start up again.

The few scholars who have attempted to transcribe auction chants with some sensitivity to the musical characteristics of the practice have portrayed the chant as nonmetrical. Geoffrey Miller’s study of east-coast American antique auctions, the only significant ethnomusicological study of auctioneering to date, thus sidesteps a crucial aspect of the music of auction chant. Figure 4.1, Miller’s transcription of an excerpt of antique auctioneer Cal Smith’s chant, provides a study of the rhythmic gestures of the bid-call. The transcription does not notate a metrical organization, though some regularity is suggested by the repeating accent marks. Likewise, Koenraad Kuiper and Frederick Tillis offer three brief, textless chant transcriptions without meter in their study of the rhetorical and musical foundations of tobacco auctioneering style (see Figure 3.2).

Miller, Kuiper, and Tillis choose to represent the auction chant as a string of continuous iterations with little or no metrical organization. Miller does specify that the tempo and pulse are consistent (here, at 168 beats per minute), and both he and Kuiper and Tillis account for accents within the pulse stream. However, such representations suggest that there is no periodicity to the organization of beats within this ongoing stream. In regard to tobacco auctioneering, Kuiper goes so far as to state, “There are no rhythmic restrictions or boundaries of regularity such as might be found in fixed metrical units or
Figure 4.1. Geoffrey Miller, Cal Smith’s Sale of the Powell Painting

Source: Geoffrey Miller, “Are You All Unhappy at a Twenty Dollar Bill?: Text, Tune, and Context at Antique Auctions,” 190-91.
measures in a traditional musical context.”\textsuperscript{14} To the contrary, my experience with both the performance of auction chant and the observation of auctioneers in practice suggests that a free meter representation of auction chant fails to capture a significant rhythmic component of the practice which is, in fact, a fundamental expressive and effective device of the chant. Metrical organization within the auction chant does indeed exist, but in a way that is distinctive to the practice of auctioneering.

Darrah Williams suggests that a good auctioneer will construct a chant in such a way that the bidding audience will physically respond to the pulse stream with movements such as toe-tapping or rocking:

When you look down, and you’re the auctioneer, or you’re at an auction, and you see people tapping their feet—I mean, you’ll see auctioneers who tap their feet—but if you see the crowd tapping their feet, then you know you’ve kind of got ’em. I mean, people don’t tap their feet when they’re uncomfortable. I mean, you know, they don’t kind of move back and forth when they’re uncomfortable. So, I always figured if they’re tapping their feet and they’re coming right along with me, we’re doing fine.\textsuperscript{15}

I have witnessed just this type of toe-tapping, head-nodding, and rhythmic rocking in audience members at numerous auctions, and I have found myself tapping my toes along with many of the auctioneers I observed during my fieldwork. Williams’ comment demonstrates that audience members do innately

\textsuperscript{14} Kuiper and Tillis, 146.

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, interview.
engage with the bid-call in a musical manner, feeling some sort of metrical organization to the auction chant.

Toe tapping, as a physical reaction to a sounding phenomenon, can be understood as an embodied representation of a hierarchical grouping of rhythmic events in the performance practice being observed. With the exception of especially slow tempos, when a listener taps her toes, she rarely taps at the beat level but instead at some slower tempo that contains the beat within it. When we listen to a Sousa march, we will generally tap our toes to the over-riding two-beat organization of the music. The flow of the beat is generally much faster than the rate at which a person taps her toes (usually double or triple the rate of the tapping toe). Through physical behavior, then, the engaged listener delineates a hierarchy of pulse, an organizing structure within which the beats occur: a meter. These hierarchical organizations of beats are represented visually in notated musical systems by dividing groupings of beats into measures, patterned blocks or chunks that the performer can readily perceive and reproduce.

In recent years, issues of meter and hierarchical rhythmic organization have been examined at length in scholarship that investigates the foundational requirements for meter. In particular, the work of Christopher Hasty, Justin London, and Jonathan Kramer offer useful models for the discussion of meter in the practice of auctioneering. Hasty describes the expectations listeners place on unfolding musical sounds as a process of projection:
If we are to follow the event, our attention must be relatively continuous....It requires above all that we keep moving ahead, that we anticipate what is about to happen in order to follow what is happening. Since we do not, in fact, know the future, our anticipation is necessarily provisional and must not be too narrowly circumscribed. Anticipation in this sense is not the projection of a definite outcome but a readiness to interpret emerging novelty in the light of what has gone before. If what does happen cannot have been anticipated in this sense—if it cannot be felt to conform sufficiently to what has gone before—we may suffer a lapse of attention.  

Hasty argues that the listener quickly develops a set of expectations about upcoming events based on the events that have just occurred. In regard to the organization of beats in a piece of music, a listener will be inclined to expect the periodic repetition of groupings of beats that have been heard in the immediate past. This expectation can be realized or confirmed, contradicted, or denied by unfolding events. If expectations are sufficiently confirmed, then the listener discerns meter. For Hasty, then, projection itself is meter and is both a result of the relationship between what the music prepares us for and what is actually delivered.

Justin London develops Hasty’s concept of projection-as-meter further, through a psychologically based model of entrainment, or “a synchronization of


17 Realization, contradiction, denial, and hiatus, are Hasty’s terms, each describing the manner in which the listener’s sense of projected meter can be either confirmed or resisted by the unfolding musical event.

18 Ibid., 91.
some aspect of our biological activity with regularly recurring events in the environment.”

London argues that:

As we will see, entrainment is at times more and at times less than a phase-locking of the listener’s attentional rhythms with temporal regularities in the musical surface….Musical meter is the anticipatory schema that is the result of our inherent abilities to entrain to periodic stimuli in our environment.

For London, the perception of meter is a deeply embedded series of responses to the periodicity of rhythmic (or, by extension, any sounding) events. Like Hasty’s model of projection, London’s model suggests that the listener develops expectations about upcoming musical events, but moreover, the listener undergoes a “training” process through which the musical material pre-disposes the listener to both receive and interpret upcoming musical stimuli in specific ways.

In light of Hasty and London’s theories of projection and entrainment, the auction chant is metrical in the sense that it entrains the listener to perceive the chant as hierarchically and regularly organized, even though that organization is, at many points, disrupted or contradicted. Collectibles auctioneer Jim Seeck offers specific description of the metrical nature of the auction chant:

When I came out of auction school, Ralph Middleton — he was the guy that pushed me to go to auction school — and he said to me when I came out of auction school, “Jim, if I can do the two-step to you, I’m gonna use


20 Ibid., 12.
you. Not until.” And that was kind of the learning experience I had. To this day, you’ll see me at class, I’ll sit there and tap my feet to somebody who’s chanting, and if I can do it, I enjoy their chant. If I can’t, I don’t.21

Middleton’s comment compares a pleasing bid-call to the two-step, the American country and western dance in 4/4 time also known as the Texas two-step, which is characterized by a quick-quick-slow-slow progression of feet movements.

Middleton’s comparison of bid-calling to the two-step suggests that a successful chant must have a metrical organization to the beat pattern such that a person could actually dance to it. Indeed, for any rhythmic pattern to be danceable, it must be both relatively consistent in tempo and repetitive in its groupings of the ongoing stream of beats.

The perceived effect of deviations from an established meter is not one of a complex multi-meter structure, but rather a brief suspension of the regular metric flow of the auction chant. The auctioneer entrains the bidding audience to expect a specific meter such that an overall metric organization is experienced despite frequent and often complex departures from that meter. Thus, while it would be inaccurate to describe auction chant as entirely metrical, it would be equally incorrect to characterize it as rhythmically and metrically free. The auction chant normally employs a steady tempo, and its consistent pulse undergoes regular, systematic organization in the form of a perceptible, if not omnipresent, meter. Most auctioneers display metric tendencies in their chant

21 Seeck, interview.
practice, favoring either duple- or triple-meter patterns. An auctioneer will usually settle into his or her preferred meter right away, but digress from that meter quite freely as the dynamics of a sale dictate. Thus, the meter is, in a sense, flexible. Meter can expand and contract to facilitate the acquisition of a new bid (and thus, a new number), the insertion of an extra filler word or phrase, a protracted statement of a number meant to get the bidders’ attention, or an emphatic statement meant to stress the qualities of the item being sold or the urgency with which bidders should act. These and many more examples of temporary digressions from an established meter act as moments of rhythmic and metric contrast.

Another chant transcription from Miller’s study demonstrates that even his own free-meter representation is, itself, highly metrical. Figure 4.3 shows Miller’s original transcription of an auction chant by Archie Moody in free rhythm. If the accent marks are interpreted as indicators of meter, then the entire excerpt rests firmly in a duple meter, as represented by Example 4.3 (here, expressed in 2/8 to retain the durations present in Miller’s original transcription). In my rewriting of his transcription, the brackets above the staff indicate phrases (most already delineated by Miller’s rehearsal numbers in the original transcription). Phrase brackets reveal that the 2/8 measures are frequently organized into groups of four or five measures, and with only a few exceptions, into groups of two or six measures.
Figure 4.2. Geoffrey Miller, Transcription of Archie Moody Chant

> Unit of pulse.

five is the bid now will you get ten dollar bill? Ten is the bid now will you get ten dollars,

... ten is the bid now will you get fifteen dollars? Fifteen the bid now will you get twenty?

Twenty the bid now will you get twenty five? What am I bid now, will I get five,

will you give thirty? Hey, thirty the bid now will you go thirty? Thirty the bid now,

twenty five the bid now will you go thirty? You get thirty, now fire. Hey, thirty-

five, will you give forty dollars? What'll you bid now, will you give forty dollars? What'll you bid?

What'll you bid now will you go thirty five, will you give forty? I'm bid

forty dollars will you give five? Forty five, will you give five? Will you give fifty dollars

fifty the bid now make it five, five, make it fifty five. Hey, fifty the bid now,

make it fifty five. How am I bid now, make it fifty five. It's nothing but money,

spend it. Hey fifty five now sixty. Hey, fifty five, will you go sixty dollars?
Six-ty the bid now will you go six-ty? Six-ty dol-lars, fif-ty five, will you go six-ty?

Six-ty dol-lars, you want in, will you go six-ty? I’ll bid fif-ty five,

will you go six-ty dol-lars? Six-ty’s the bid now will you go six-ty dol-lars?

Six-ty’s the bid now, I’ve got fif-ty five, will you go six-ty? Six-ty’s the bid now

will you go six-ty? A-ny one give six-ty?

(A heightened speech)

Last call. (Pause.) And I have said it to the gentleman way in the back.

fifty-five dollars. Give him a hand.

Source: Miller, 193-4.
Example 4.3. Metered Version of Miller’s Transcription of Archie Moody Chant

\[ \text{Example 4.3. Metered Version of Miller’s Transcription of Archie Moody Chant} \]
Example 4.3 continued

will you give five? Will you give fifty dollars fifty's the bid now make it five, five,

make it fifty-five Hey, fifty's the bid now, make it fifty-five. How am I bid now,

make it fifty-five It's no thing but money, spend it Hey fifty-five now sixty. Hey,

fifty-five, will you go sixty dollars? Sixty the bid now will you go sixty? Sixty

dollars, fifty-five, will you go sixty? Sixty dollars, you want in, will you go sixty?

I'm bid fifty-five, will you go sixty dollars? Sixty's the bid now will you go

sixty dollars? Sixty's the bid now, I've got fifty-five, will you go sixty? Sixty's the

bid now, will you go sixty? Anyone give sixty?
In fact, Miller’s example is unceasingly metrical at the most basic level. His transcription reveals a series of regularly organized groupings based on a pattern of stress on the first of every two eighth notes (indicated by accents). According to Jonathan Kramer, this, “patterned succession of accented timepoints” qualifies the example as one of musical meter.\textsuperscript{22} Expressed at the metric level of 2/8, the entire excerpt remains consistent in its organization of beats at the basic level.

However, in this example, the metric complexity appears at the hypermetric level.\textsuperscript{23} While the fast duple meter remains consistent, the chant resists symmetry in its hypermetric structure, lending it a sense of surprise and constant change. The shifting hypermetric structure is, itself, governed by the interplay of pattern with variation or extension. The fundamental pattern of the chant consists of the two-measure phrase: “X is the bid now,” most often followed by a version of the two-measure phrase, “will you get/go Y.”\textsuperscript{24} The hypermetric variation occurs when Moody completes the opening two-measure phrase with a two, three or four measure phrase. Measures six through nine


\textsuperscript{23} Kramer defines hypermeasure as, “group of measures that functions on a deep hierarchic level much as does a measure on the surface.” Ibid., 453.

\textsuperscript{24} Moody varies the words slightly in this pattern throughout the chant, though the hypermetric implications remain the same. For example, “X is the bid now,” is varied slightly, becoming “What am I bid now,” and “How am I bid now” during the chant.
represent the most basic 2+2 structure, resulting in a four-measure hypermeter, while mm. 1-5 and mm. 90-94 represent a 2+3 measure phrase with the second half of the basic structure extended. Mm. 81 through 89, though much longer than the basic phrase structure, is also an expansion on the basic model, here presenting a protracted statement of “make it five, five, make it fifty five.” The result in this case is a 2+3+4 construction where the basic two-measure phrase structure is expanded and then expanded again. Hypermetric groupings of four and five—the most commonly occurring patterns in the chant—are the result of Moody’s flexible management of an additive metric construction based on individual units in either their original two-measure form or in expanded variations. Per London, then, the listener is entrained to hear the consistent 2/8 meter, but, per Hasty, the listener may be hard pressed to project any sense of repetitive organization on higher levels of hypermeter. This tension is not a problem for Kramer, though, who argues that, “Meter can therefore exist on several levels some of which are regular and some not. Because we perceive several levels simultaneously, we are quite capable of understanding irregularities that are subsumed into deeper-level regularities.”

In observing, recording, and analyzing auction chants, I have actually found this level of metric regularity to be extremely rare. Of the hundreds of hours of chant observed during my fieldwork, only a few archival recordings of

25 Ibid., 102.
tobacco auctioneers displayed such consistent metric regularity as that shown in Miller’s transcription. My own data leads me to believe that Miller’s transcription either represents a style different from the commonly-held practice employed by auctioneers, or that he compressed or otherwise smoothed out some of the metrical irregularities present in his informant’s chant in order to render a more accessible musical representation in his transcription.

In my fieldwork, it has been most common to find that an auctioneer will quickly establish a meter to which he will return again and again. Meter is rarely stable for long periods of time, however. If, for example, an auctioneer establishes a duple meter early in his chant (which will be described here as 2/4 for purposes of explanation), he will frequently deviate from that grouping pattern, expanding a grouping to 3/4 or contracting to 3/8. These expansions and contractions of the established meter continue to unfold at the same tempo, and the pulse stream remains consistent. Such expansions and contractions of beat groupings do not suspend the ongoing flow of musical time in the chant. Rather, the deviations from the established meter represent a sophisticated metrical flexibility that, without fail, always returns to the originally established meter.26 Indeed, there are times in which an auctioneer will pause altogether, or

26 Koenraad Kuiper and Frederick Tillis, in their study of tobacco auctioneering, offer a contradicting argument when they write, “there is a frequent use of syncopated rhythms in the performances of the chants. Much of the syncopation comes from the natural fluctuations in speech patterns, syllables and points of emphasis in pitch inflections…there are no rhythmic restrictions or boundaries of
lapse into a speaking voice briefly to clarify an issue or comment on the quality and value of the item up for sale. These moments break the metrical pattern altogether and represent a “hiatus” in Hasty’s terms.27

In her winning 2007 International Auctioneer Championship performance (Example 4.4), Denise Shearin offers an example of a relatively stable metric organization with only slight deviations from a recurring meter. Shearin relies primarily on a 2/4 meter throughout the chant but opens in 3/4 and expands some moments within the chant to a 3/4 meter in order to accommodate a longer phrase or additional filler word. With only a few deviations, Shearin chooses to begin each metric grouping with the number, filling out the remaining beat or two in the grouping with connecting filler words.28 The repetition of the number “seventy,” in mm. 15 causes a momentary shift into 3/4 to accommodate the additional word. Her repetition of the word “seventy” likely indicates the receipt and acknowledgement of a new bid of seventy dollars, and thus she deviates from the established meter to accommodate the receipt of a new bid. She immediately reestablishes the 2/4 meter in the next measure.

regularity such as might be found in fixed metrical units or measures in a traditional musical context.” I understand Kuiper and Tillis’s assessment to confuse the flexible metrical practice of the auctioneer with the existence of syncopated rhythmic figures. Kuiper and Tillis, 146.

27 Hasty, 88.

28 “Bid” always occurs on the downbeat as well, with the exception of the phrase “quarter bid,” which offsets “bid” to beat two.
Example 4.4. Denise Shearin, International Auctioneer Championship

Performance, 2007

Al-right-y he-re, let's go. Start me out now. Wood-y give thirt-y dol-lar bid?

Let's go.

I'm a thirt-y dol-lar bid, wood-y give fort-y dol-lar

bid, wood-y give fift-y dol-lar bid, wood-y give six-ty dol-lar bid, wood-y give


bid, I'm at eight-y dol-lar bid, wood-y give nine-ty dol-lar bid? Give a hund-red, give a

hund-red, wood-y give one hund-red dol-lar bid? Thank you now. Make it quart-er.

One hund-red dol-lar bid, now give a quart-er, wood-y give one hund-red

fift-y dol-lar? Bid it by now, make it one hund-red fift-y. Quar-ter bid half,
Example 4.4 continued

Shearin’s next metric shift occurs at “Quarter bid half, quarter bid half” and represents a musical emphasis on this bid request through use of metric variation. An alternative approach to the transcription of her performance might divide the two 3/4 measures into three 2/4 measures with a syncopated accent. Shearin’s musical intent is quite clear, however, as she places a strong accent on the triple division, and thus we hear this moment as a brief but clear shift from the recurring 2/4 pattern preceding it. Though Shearin opens the chant in 3/4, the chant “takes off” once she introduces the 2/4 meter. In the opening measures, Shearin searches for the first bid, framing this portion of the bid-call as separate from the main chant by performing it in 3/4. Though the primary meter of the chant is 2/4, Shearin’s introduction of 3/4 meter in the beginning and its recurrence at “quarter bid half,” establishes 3/4 as an alternate meter that provides both variety and punctuation at important structural points in the chant.

The hypermeter, on the other hand, is almost entirely consistent, with two-measure units prevailing throughout the chant, regardless of whether the meter is duple or triple. Shearin’s chant quickly establishes an expectation by

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29 Mm. 31-33 and 48-50 expand the two-measure hypermeter to three, but both moments represent points at which Shearin is incorporating new material or struggling to accommodate rhythmic changes in numbers and filler words into the established chant. In both cases, she inserts one additional measure into the
the listener for a continuation of the initial 2/4 meter, but at times her metric prolongations resist the listener’s expectation. According to Hasty’s model, meter is “contradicted” when a grouping is longer than projected or “denied” when a grouping is shorter than projected. These disruptions of meter pose a problem in Hasty’s model, as it becomes difficult to determine just how long a listener will maintain his projection of meter onto unfolding musical events.

Hasty characterizes meter as “time continuous” or always-evolving for the listener, but meter in auctioneering resists such a description. A sense of meter in auctioneering is not evolving, but is set or entrained early on. Aided by the uncanny tempo consistencies shown by auctioneers, rhythm, tempo and meter are firmly grounded for the listener, so much so that frequent disruptions do not have as jarring an effect as they would if the referential meter did not exert such a powerful control over the listeners’ experience and expectations. London, whose discussion of entrainment is but an expansion of Hasty’s model of projection through the lens of perceptual and cognitive psychology, suggests, “Composers have long counted on (and exploited) our proclivity to maintain an established metric framework, and the force with which we will impose metric hypermetric structure and then returns immediately to the established two-measure hypermeter.

30 Hasty, 88.

31 Ibid., 69.
order on an uncooperative musical surface.” Thus, London recognizes that metrical entrainment creates an overwhelming desire on the part of the listener to retain an established sense of meter, even against both contradictions and denials of that very meter.

In the course of performance, it is most accurate to say that the bidder or audience member hears a “referential” meter, a metrical grouping of beats that is foundational to the chant. This meter, however, is not omnipresent; it is consistently disrupted through hiatus, contradiction, and denial. The key to understanding the rhythmic and metric significance of the referential meter is expectation. The listener is primed, from the first presentation of the chant, to expect a certain musical regularity to the pattern of the chant. By consistently returning to one familiar meter after each deviation or disruption, the auctioneer prepares the bidding audience not only to hear this metric foundation, but also to desire its return. The referential meter, then, provides musical consistency for the listener as they interpret the emergent musical events of the bid-call. When the meter is consistent, the chant engages the listener and provides pleasure; the listener can tap her toes, or, if bold enough, dance the two step.

In the transcription below (Example 4.5), I have adopted an approach that places the referential meter in the foreground. If, as my argument suggests, the referential meter is that which has the most significant and entraining effect on

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32 London, 17.
the listener, then all deviations from that meter in the form of contradictions and
expansions or denials and contractions are heard as secondary to the referential
meter. To depict this effect, I have chosen to represent metrical indications for all
spans of disruption from the referential meter in parentheses to differentiate
these momentary deviations as secondary to the referential meter. The
parenthetical deviations are brief, never establishing the alternate meter for more
than one or two measures.

Like the example of Denise Shearin’s IAC competition chant, the
following sale by Jim Seeck relied on a 2/4 referential meter. After the opening
intonation, the chant alternated between 2/4 and 3/4 meters. Once bidding was
consistent and bids were coming in quickly, Seeck settled into a 2/4 meter for
longer stretches of time, but he contradicted the entrained 2/4 meter by
expanding to 3/4 at specific moments. Seeck’s metrical contradictions always
appeared in correlation with interjections of the filler words “now,” “give,” and
“give me,” expanding the duple-meter nature of each number by exactly one
beat.

These contradictions, in the form of one-beat expansions, do not re-orient
the listener to a new expectation of a 3/4 meter, but rather, serve as momentary
deviation from the established and ongoing pattern of 2/4. The brief metrical
contradiction throws the chant off-balance, but only for that moment—time
enough to grab the listener’s attention and confuse the audience’s musical
entrainment.
Example 4.5. Jim Seeck, Carnival Art Glass Auction, Lot No. 4

(out of time, but intoned)

Al-right, who'll give me two hun-dred?  
Twent-y five, start me out.

Twenty five, twenty five now twenty five, give twenty five, twenty five now

thirty five dol-lars, can I get thirty five, twenty five, thirty y

And now thirty five, fort-y five now, fif-ty five, fif-ty five, six-ty five,

six-ty five, six-ty five now six-ty five?  
Fif-ty five now six-ty five,

six-ty five, six-ty five now six-ty five, give me six-ty five, fif-ty five, six-ty

five?  
Six ty five? Sold it to you fif-ty five dol-lars.

Source: Jim Seeck, “Lot 4: Pinecone saucer-shaped plate in green” (Carnival art glass sale), recorded live by Nicole Malley, St. Louis, Missouri, October 2, 2010.
In moments of disruption, the listener has only an expectation that the referential meter will continue. When it does not, the listener is unaware of what the new “temporary” meter is. The auctioneer wants the listener to desire a predictable pattern of rhythmic organization, and to achieve such a comfortable pattern, bids need to be coming in consistently. If they are not, the auctioneer will resort to other methods of encouragement such as rhythmic or expressive disruption to excite bidding.

The rhythmic indicator that both auctioneer and bidding audience are in sync is the reappearance of the referential meter. When the bidders “get in line” with the auctioneer and rejoin the process, the musicality of the chant reappears. In the example of Jim Seeck’s auction chant, the listener’s entrained expectation for duple meter is satisfied when the bidding is moving at a quick pace. When bidding appears to stall between $55 and $65, Seeck varies both the tempo and the meter in an attempt to excite bidding, but once the close of the sale is imminent, he returns to a consistent referential meter to end the chant. This synchronous rhythmic state is one in which bids are coming in at a consistent rate in line with both the meter and the tempo established by the auctioneer, and although the bids may not appear in complete metric lock-step with him, they appear consistently enough that the auctioneer can smoothly incorporate them into a recurring, referential meter.

Auctioneers in my research have suggested that there is a sort of reciprocal effect when this referential meter is established such that bidders seem
to act more instinctively, having been drawn into the pattern and rhythm of the auction chant. Auctioneer Darrell Cannon comments, “You may have ‘em rockin’ in their seat, you know, or boppin’ back and forth when they’re standing at the tables. Then you know you’ve got ‘em in the palm of your hand. They’re gonna do absolutely what you tell ‘em to do.” Echoing Darrah Williams’ description of toe-tapping and rocking, Cannon suggests that the establishment of a regular, recurring meter, evidenced through physical, almost dance-like gestures on the part of the audience, reveal that the bidders are caught up in a musical space which, in turn, encourages specific kinds of bidding behaviors. In particular, referential meter allows the auctioneer to exert a special kind of control over the bidders, encouraging them—in a distinctly musical manner—to bid at a specific rate and with a specific consistency.

Referential meter is usually quite easy to identify in auction chants, as most auctioneers start and finish a chant in the referential meter and return to it with great frequency during the course of a sale. However, some auctioneers employ metrical practices so fluid and complex that it becomes difficult to identify a single referential meter. Such is the case with auctioneer Spanky Assiter (Example 4.6). Assiter is considered by many auctioneers to possess a special level of virtuosity as a practitioner of the auction chant, and indeed, his manipulation of meter represents a departure from the common practice. The

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33 Cannon, interview.
following excerpt is from a thoroughbred racehorse sale at the annual Keeneland auctions in Lexington, Kentucky. In this example, Assiter incorporates a great variety of meters, such that it becomes difficult to talk about a single referential meter. The opening moments of the chant suggest a 2/4 referential meter, but Assiter quickly deviates from this meter and rarely returns to it for more than one or two measures. Metrical organization is far from arbitrary after the opening moments, though. Assiter shifts frequently between 3/8, 5/8, and 3/4, but with striking fluidity. In particular, the filler phrases, “body want,” body give,” and “able to bid” create opportunities for metrical expansion, or, when they stand alone, for metrical contraction. Because Assiter employs each meter with such regularity, it may be most useful to understand his style as one possessing multiple referential meters.

Of course, the implications of this uncommon aspect of Assiter’s style suggest that a listener must become entrained to simultaneous metrical possibilities, though neither Hasty nor London allows for such a conception of entrainment. Over the course of a one-hour shift at the podium during the Keeneland sales day, Assiter consistently returns to these multiple referential meters, and because these multiple meters recur with regularity and most often in association with specific formulaic rhythmic gestures, the constant meter shifts are not nearly as jarring to the listener as the musical transcription might suggest. Thus, the listener is entrained to expect both referential meters due to the consistent manner in which each appears.
Example 4.6. Spanky Assiter, Keeneland Thoroughbred Yearling

Racehorse Auction, Hip No. 1714

\[\text{\[= 194}\]

\[\text{\begin{align*}
&\text{And here now body give five to bid, five to buy. Anybody give} \\
&\text{twenty-five thousand dollar? Anybody give three, now five?} \\
&\text{I'm gonna go five, would you give five to bid, five and seven,} \\
&\text{seven, seven bid it on five, bid it on seven? Ten? Anybody give} \\
&\text{twelve, fifteen, seventeen body give twenty-two, five, five, five wanna give} \\
&\text{five, body give seven, body give thirty? I'm gonna go five, thirty} \\
&\text{five, body want forty thousand dollar, five, fifty thousand dollar} \\
&\text{bid body want now five, five, sixty-five, seventy thousand dollar bid, body want}
\end{align*}\]}


Source: Spanky Assiter, “Hip No. 1714” (thoroughbred racehorse sale), recorded live by Nicole Malley, Lexington, Kentucky, September 19, 2010. At high-profile horse auctions such as the annual Keeneland yearling auction, hundreds of horses are auctioned over a two-week period. The hip number is the reference number for a specific horse and is so called because a piece of paper is attached to the horse’s hip to identify it by its number as it is led through the stalls and viewing areas and on to the stage for sale.

Auctioneers do stop the continuous flow of the chant for specific purposes and with specific effects. Moments in which the music of the chant does cease represent a distinct contrast from the referential meter and its deviations. Using Kramer’s terminology, auctioneering employs “multiple time” or “temporal multiplicity,” by which he means “any musical temporality that entails several directions, continuities, linearities, progression, or species of time.”

34 Kramer, 169.
time as conflicting temporal elements of the unified chant performance. By virtual time, Kramer means, the special type of time we experience when deep listening to music removes us from our everyday world.”³⁵ Absolute time is “a linear succession of now-moments, sometimes called ‘real time,’ ‘ordinary time,’ or...‘lived time’ and ‘world time,’” and social time is, “the ordinary time imposed on us by timetables, schedules, and deadlines.”³⁶ Due to the musical nature of auctioneering, Kramer’s concept of temporal multiplicity is most apt in describing the specific nature of time into which both auctioneer and listener are transported during the performance of the auction chant.

The tempo, rhythm, meter, and sung pitch of the chant may stop for the auctioneer to make a brief comment about the item, to investigate a point of contention or confusion in the bidding process, or to remark on the ongoing sale itself, and these moments take the listener out of the virtual time of the chant altogether, and place him or her back in ordinary time, where, momentarily, the sale of the item is not conducted through a musical performance, but in normal, everyday speech. The auctioneer frequently disrupts the virtual time of the chant to bring the bidders back into “absolute time” or “social time.” Often, a pause in tempo and meter will be intoned on pitch, but out of time from the music of the chant. In my transcriptions, these instances are indicated with “x”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.
note-heads on the intoned pitches with rhythmic approximations of the relative durations of the intoned pitches. Such moments often occur out-of-time, so the rhythmic indications are proportional, but not musically exact, and are not intended to suggest that the auctioneer maintains the tempo of the chanted sections during these speech sections. In most cases, the “out of time” introduction is pitch-specific and performed in steady tempo, but there may be long pauses between spoken fragments, keeping these intoned passages from being truly metrical or continuous like the chant itself. Paul Behr’s chant at the Mannheim Denver automobile auction (Example 4.7) provides an example of this type of distinction between consistent pulse and hiatus in his alternation of musical time and intoned speech.

Some auctioneers complicate the temporal multiplicity even more by bringing social time into the fray with phrases like, “oh no, gotta go!,” “The sale’s today folks!,” “We gotta go!,” etc. These comments are often performed in the virtual time of the chant (i.e., in meter and tempo with a sung pitch), and alert the bidder to the fact that social time still exists and is dictating the musical performance at hand. When these expressions of social time occur, they are notated here in the same manner as the auction chant unless the phrase is spoken in absolute time (breaking the tempo of the chant). It is the tension between referential and disrupted meter, and the three species of time—virtual, absolute, and social—that makes the auctioneer’s performance engaging and surprising.
Example 4.7. Paul C. Behr, Lot No. 77-2010, Ford Escape

(out of time, but intoned)

All wheel drive, look here now, twenty ten,

seventeen thousand dollar limited bid a long now limited. Twenty two?

Twenty one one? Bid a long now down, bid a long now twenty one grand twenty one one.

Bid a long now two, two now three? Want em on three, now four? Five? Bid a long now five, all done? Twenty one five? Bid a long now six hundred now seven to buy 'em. Bid a long now eight? Twenty one eight? Now nine, twenty two? Bid a long now two. Two, do two Net's out. Twenty two, bid a long now bid on, bid a long now two there. bid a long now bid on, bid a long now two there. Bid a
Example 4.7 continued


When auctioneers use “rhythm” to refer to pulse, meter, and the continuous filling-in of musical time, they are articulating their musical priorities as chant performers. At the same time, the general terms that they employ to describe their rhythmic practices encompass a complex set of rhythmic strategies characterized by a flexible sense of meter. Both the International Auctioneer Championship and the World Automobile Auctioneers Championship include rhythm as a scored component of judging criteria (see Appendix B), but the lack of musical specificity with which the term is presented on the judging sheets suggests that the community of auctioneers possesses a collective understanding of this term. An auctioneer’s rhythm is not defined by the individual figures he strings together during the performance of the bid-call. Rather, it is a general musical impression created by continuous musical motion and variable metric
organization of steady pulse within the auction chant. Further, moments of metric contradiction and denial of established meter do not lack a sense of metric regularity for the listener. Rather, these disruptions are heard as the continuance of projected musical events, related, but somehow not conforming exactly, to the referential meter to which the listener has been entrained. Though disruptive to the ongoing sense of metric “comfort” afforded by the referential meter, these deviations are not heard as the cessation of the rhythmic and overall musical qualities of the chant.
CHAPTER 5
THE IMPROVISING AUCTIONEER: FORMULAIC PERFORMANCE,
CREATIVITY, AND FLOW STATE

The improvised musical practice of the auctioneer involves a complex set of skills strategically employed to manage the economic and social dynamics of a sale. To address the sale’s many demands, an auctioneer engages in an act of improvisation that, though rooted in an oral formulaic paradigm, remains flexible enough to allow for spontaneous, creative performance. The basic structures of the bid-call (as discussed in chapters 2 through 4) can be identified through their individual components. However, this tells us little about the ways in which distinct musical elements function as part of an improvisational practice, because an auctioneer’s performance is informed by a variety of pressures specific to sales type and to the emergent conditions in the course of the sale. While an oral formulaic model accounts for some of the strategies employed by the auctioneer, much of the bid-call’s style and structure is determined not by formulaic gesture, but by the manner in which the auctioneer engages with the emergent social dimensions of the auction. The auctioneer’s ability to respond to these ever-changing elements allows him to craft an improvised musical performance with identifiable structural components that are creatively employed in ways contingent upon the often subtle interpersonal dynamics of the auction. Furthermore, optimum auctioneering performance is
an embodied practice, characterized as a special psychological state within which the auctioneer experiences peak performance skills and facility with the formulaic and improvisatory components of the bid-call.

**Auctioneering as Formulaic Performance**

To date, no study of auctioneering has examined the practice as a form of musical improvisation. However, Koenraad Kuiper offered the first steps toward such a consideration in his study of the linguistic practices of the auctioneer. Kuiper’s examination of formulaic structures in auctioneering along a continuum of low- to high-pressure auction scenarios suggests that the auctioneer creates a new musical chant for each sale based on a collection of patterns stored in long-term and short-term memory. Kuiper posits, “when speakers are under heavy pressure from having to perform activities other than speaking they do so using formulaic resources.”

Because no two sales will contain exactly the same types or degrees of pressure, the auctioneer’s reliance upon formulaic structures will correspondingly vary in relation to pressures at the sale or between different types of sales. Thus, in confronting a range of

37 Koenraad Kuiper, *Smooth Talkers: The Linguistic Performance of Auctioneers and Sportscasters* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 33. Because Kuiper’s study approaches auctioneering from a linguistic perspective, his depiction of chant performance is somewhat musically unspecific. He often characterizes bid-calling as speaking or chant and uses the terms somewhat interchangeably, but does not differentiate between the two in regard to pitch specificity and vocal control. When Kuiper writes about the fast speech of the auctioneer, he is often referring the sung chant of the bid-call.
pressures, the auctioneer constructs the bid-call from basic linguistic components in a process that mediates these pressures through the performance of the auction chant.

Kuiper explains that auctions with a high rate of speed in regard to the number of lots per hour present the highest linguistic pressure for the auctioneer, while auctioneers who sell at a lower lot-per-hour rate experience the least linguistic pressure. At the high-pressure end of the spectrum are tobacco and livestock auctions, in the middle, antique auctions, and at the low end, real estate auctions and high-end art and collectibles auctions.\(^{38}\) In high-pressure auctions, “the rate of sale in lots per minute is very rapid and...bids are made very rapidly, thus placing pressure on an auctioneer to keep pace with the bidding

\(^{38}\) The antique auctions to which Kuiper refers fall into the category better known as personal property sales in the auction profession. Kuiper’s antique auction fieldwork was conducted in the eastern United States, where antique auctions are similar in structure and pace to weekly auction house or auction barn sales common in the personal property field of auctioneering. Kuiper’s study does not account for all of the major sub-categories of auctioneering, including but not limited to benefit/charity, agricultural land and equipment, and automobile auctions. Rather, he provides a general continuum along which researchers might position specific auction types. The high-end auctions to which Kuiper refers are of a specific type and include those conducted at Sotheby’s of London and Christie’s of New York. These auctions are not conducted in chant but are entirely spoken at a very slow rate of speed. The high-end auctions Kuiper examines must be distinguished from the high-end auctions discussed in this study such as the Keeneland Horse Auctions in Lexington, Kentucky, which are conducted in chant. This study does not examine the high-end auction types to which Kuiper refers because they do not possess the musical characteristics present in all other types of American auctions.
and the required rate of sale.” These demands require the auctioneer to process information, make decisions, and implement changes to the bid-call more quickly than in a low-pressure sale, where the auctioneer has time to make more deliberate and considered decisions about how he will guide the sale over a longer period.

Performing under such demands, auctioneers, like improvising musicians from many traditions, do not invent the practice anew each time they approach the auction block. Rather, the auctioneer negotiates each new sale with a “tool kit” of sorts—a collection of formulaic structures that can be deployed almost automatically during the bid-call. According to Kuiper, auctioneers operating under higher-pressure scenarios will rely more heavily on formulaic linguistic structures in order to facilitate a faster and more efficient translation of the quickly developing auction events into a coherent, effective chant. Kuiper describes the characteristics of a linguistic formula as follows:

1. It is a lexical item consisting of a sequence of words.
2. It has syntactic structure.
3. It has specific conditions of use, that is, it does particular work for a speaker in a given situation.40

Any filler phrase meets the first two conditions: a series of words with clear, meaningful syntactic structure (even if the filler phrase is so distorted as to

39 Kuiper, 48.
40 Ibid., 16.
be incomprehensible to most listeners). Individual filler words, while not a sequence as described in Kuiper’s first characteristic, are certainly lexical items and are part of a sequential grouping of words. These oral formulae, in the form of filler words and phrases, facilitate the needs of auctioneers in performance by allowing them to quickly access information for use in the chant from short-term memory rather than long term memory.

Kuiper, who based his work on the cognitive psychological research of Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, explains:

Long term memory (henceforth LTM) is unfillable in a finite lifetime. It is associative, that is, the items in it are connected by relations. The time required to read a chunk of information from LTM is of the order of a few hundred milliseconds but writing into it requires much longer. The capacity of short term memory (henceforth STM), which holds the information immediately available to the brain for processing is very small: around seven chunks, only two of which can be retained for one task. The information in STM decays rapidly but can be held by rehearsal so that it remains available.

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41 Instructors at World Wide College of Auctioneering and my fieldwork subjects all emphasized that filler words and phrases have to make sense even if the distortion of these words and phrases often renders them meaningless to the listener beyond their sound value. Trained auctioneers always use filler words and phrases that are logically constructed strings of words with syntactic structure and meaning. Though the average listener would likely hear no difference between logical syntax and nonsense words, conventional wisdom in the auction profession suggests that the use of nonsense filler words is distasteful, revealing too much emphasis on style.

Due to the time pressure associated with the continuous, fast-paced nature of the practice, the performing auctioneer does not have the time to access LTM in order to structure every aspect of the bid-call.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus, linguistic formulae are stored in the performer’s memory as chunks, or psychological units, available for recall as a single unit. The ability to store groups of words as formulae makes the work of recall and deployment extremely efficient. Kuiper describes the use of formulae when he states:

I assume that when a speaker uses a formula he or she needs only to retrieve it from the dictionary instead of building it up from its constituent parts. In other words, such expressions likely exist as whole or part utterances within the speaker’s dictionary and need not be built up from scratch on every new occasion.\textsuperscript{44}

It follows, then, that formulae can be identified as specific verbal patterns within the text of the auction chant and that those auction types requiring the most efficiency would rely most heavily on formulaic structures in order to make the bid-call as automatic as possible. The two- and three-part chant structures taught to new auctioneers create the foundation for an oral formulaic practice. Filler words and phrases constitute the majority of formulaic structures in the bid-call,

\textsuperscript{43} Clearly, the auctioneer is accessing LTM during a performance. All of the nonlinguistic pressures discussed above including bidding behavior and social dynamics are stored in the auctioneer’s LTM and must be recalled from LTM during the chant performance. Because the auctioneer must engage the LTM with these information-gathering tasks, the role of the STM in facilitating the production of the bid-call is all the more important and necessary.

\textsuperscript{44} Kuiper, 3.
allowing auctioneers to connect the ever-changing numbers of the advancing bid within a few patterned structures. Likewise, formulaic openings and closings provide the auctioneer with ready-made structural units that he can insert into the bid-call again and again.

In Kuiper’s model, the auction types with the highest sales-per-hour rates exert the greatest pressures on the auctioneer to quickly access and deploy bid-call components. Thus, tobacco sales, lasting sometimes less than ten seconds per sale, allow little time to retrieve, process, and translate LTM information during the bid-call. Longer rate of sale auctions such as livestock and antiques (personal property) auctions allow for some degree of relief from the extreme time constraints of the high-pressure auction, but in both high and medium-pressure scenarios, the auctioneer must perform a continuous chant, which limits the performer’s ability to access LTM. Livestock, personal property, automobile, and (American) real estate auctioneering do employ momentary pauses and breaks from the chant for reselling items, neither of which are evident in the highest-pressure auction types such as tobacco auctions. Conversely, low pressure auctions such as the high-end art and collectibles auctions held at Sotheby’s and Christie’s Auction Houses do not exhibit many, if any, of the characteristics of oral formulaic performance because the auctioneers are able to operate at a slow enough pace to utilize LTM and STM freely.45

45 Kuiper also characterizes real estate auctions as low-pressure, but his reference point for the practice of real estate auctioneering—land sales in Christchurch,
Though not addressed in Kuiper’s study, musical formulae are just as prominent in the performance of auctioneering and serve the same purposes in regard to improvisatory practice. Discrete musical gestures are available for automatic insertion into the chant under specific conditions, relieving pressure on the LTM. The musical formulae each bear distinctive rhythmic and melodic characteristics, and their appearance is generally tied to the appearance of linguistic formulae. The following example from livestock auctioneer Charlie Corkle (Example 5.1) reveals the ways in which both linguistic and musical formulae contribute to the structure of the bid-call. This example from a 1952 cattle auction spans a minute and forty-five seconds, in line with medium-pressure sales per Kuiper’s model, and offers examples of both LTM and STM recall in the performance. Though the example lasts far longer than a high-pressure sale, the auctioneer is consistently and rapidly improvising the chant, and as such, relies heavily on formulae throughout the sale. The transcription provides a lengthy enough example of Corkle’s chant to allow for the identification of formulaic structures as recurring patterns of filler words and phrases, rhythms, meter, and melodic gesture.

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New Zealand—differs significantly from American real estate auctioneering. While some real estate in the United States is sold in normal speech, the vast majority employs chant practice similar to that of Kuiper’s medium-pressure sales types. Kuiper’s New Zealand real estate examples include frequent lengthy pauses between statements spoken in normal speech, whereas a typical American real estate auction features the same continuous chant as all other types of auctioneering.
Example 5.1. Charlie Corkle, J.O. Hereford Dispersal Auction, 1952

Four twenty-five now fifty dollar now fifty dollar. I'm bid a quarter now half. Four twenty-five now fifty dollar now fifty dollar. I'm bid a quarter now fifty now seventy-five now. Fifty dollar. Do you want 'em for the five hundred?

Four hundred seventy-five now I'm at five hundred dollar. Do you want five hundred now twenty-five now fifty dollar now, fifty dollar now, fifty dollar. I'm bid a quarter now half. Fifty twenty-five now fifty dollar now fifty dollar. Do you want to bid a half? Five, five,
Example 5.1 continued

would you give a half? I'm bid a quarter now a half where?

Five hundred and twenty-five now fifty dollar now fifty dollar

(17 second break for re-sell)

Five hundred fifty now seventy-five now I'm at

seventy-five dollar. Do you wanna bid the seventy-five all done?

Five hundred seventy-five now six hundred dollar. Do you have

six hundred now a quarter? Six hundred dollar, do you wanna buy 'em at

twenty-five? I'm at twenty-five dollar. Would you give a quarter? I'm bid

six hundred dollar. Would you give a quarter? Six hundred dollar,
Example 5.1 continued

do you wanna bid the twenty-five? I'm at twenty-five dollar, would you give a

quarter? I'm bid six hundred dollar, do you want to bid the twenty-five?

Would you give a quarter where? Six hundred dollar, do you wanna give the
twenty-five? All in? Six hundred dollar, would you give a quarter?

Six hundred dollar, do you wanna bid the quarter? Five and a twenty-five dollar,

would you give a quarter? I'm bid six hundred dollar, would you give a

quarter? Six hundred dollar, do you wanna bid the twenty-five?

(16 second break for re-sell)

All done. And I'm only bid, and I'm
Example 5.1 continued

(spoken, not chanted, at approximate pitch)

Only bid six hundred and it's George's bid. Six hundred now a

quarter. Six hundred dollar, do you wanna bid the

twenty five? I'm at twenty five dollar, would you give a quarter? I'm bid

six hundred dollar, would you give a quar... Quarter now, fifty dollar now

fifty dollar. I'm bid a quarter now fifty dollar now, fifty dollar now,

fifty dollar now fifty dollar I sold her! Six and a quarter.

Source: Charlie Corkle, *J.O. Hereford Dispersal Auction*, audio recording, recorded 1952, Archives of the National Auctioneers Association.
Corkle employs sixteen distinct filler words and phrases, though many are but slight variations of one kind. Table 5.1 organizes Corkle’s filler words into six groups (related by initial word), listing the number of occurrences of both the group and its constituent member words and phrases. Corkle relies primarily on words from the first four groups, with “now” and “would you give” representing those most frequently used in the chant. “Now” functions as a connector between numbers or between filler phrases and numbers, and is used liberally throughout the chant. “Would you give,” of course, is always positioned at the beginning of phrases, initiating a string of numbers and questions in the chant structure.

The formulaic function of the filler words and phrases extends beyond their repetitive use as “go-to” syntactical units ready for quick deployment in the ongoing chant. Their use is specific and strategic. Many filler words and phrases are employed within limited contexts in the chant, suggesting that they bear a formulaic relationship with a paired text. In Charlie Corkle’s chant, the filler phrase “Would you give a” is used in all but one circumstance to precede the word “quarter” (the exception being one appearance before the word “half”). Corkle does not precede fifty, hundred, four, five or six hundred with the filler phrase, and as such the phrase serves a limited and specialized formulaic role in the chant.
Table 5.1. Filler Word Groups and Occurrences, Charlie Corkle Bid-Call

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Word/Phrase</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now I’m at</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m bid a</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m bid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And I’m only bid</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m at</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you wanna bid the</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you want</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you have</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you want ‘em for the</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you wanna bid a</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you wanna buy ‘em at</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you wanna give the</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you give a</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All done</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All in</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When Corkle accesses the psychological “chunk” (per Kuiper’s terminology) “Would you give a,” he does so through a specific formulaic prompt from the number he intends to call. “Would you give a” and “quarter” are bound together as a pair, and all Corkle must do to elicit the formula “Would you give a,” is attend to the number part of the pair. Although “Would you give a” is bound primarily to “quarter,” “quarter” is not bound solely to it, but rather, may be used in tandem with other preceding phrases such as “I’m bid a.”

Numbers may form syntactical units with more than one filler word or phrase, of course, and when they do so, the process is similar to the one outlined above. Through practice and the evolution of personal style, an auctioneer forms formulaic pairs to which he will return again and again. Spanky Assiter describes the manner in which linguistic pairs develop in an auctioneer’s personal style when he states:

The way I practiced that was I did the same, like … I would do “10, will you give 20, 20 will you give 30, 30 will you give 40,” over and over and over until I got comfortable with that. You’ll also notice that some auctioneers—I’ll use Ralph Wade as an example—with certain numbers, he’ll use certain filler words, and with other numbers, he’ll use other filler words. So that’s kind of cool because it’s easier to say with certain numbers. So that’s kind of a trick that you may learn. I assume that I do that to some extent, I just don’t know what they are because I haven’t made a conscious effort to think about it.46

Pairing numbers with one of a limited collection of filler words or phrases reduces the overwhelming number of options available to the auctioneer in the

46 Spanky Assiter, interview.
act of performance. This special formulaic process acts as a sort of filing system (to borrow another of Kuiper’s analogies) in which a limited number of filler words and phrases are “filed” under each number in the auctioneer’s memory. When the auctioneer must call a specific number, he retrieves that “file” in the system, choosing from one of only a few pairing options in the form of specific filler words and phrases. Auctioneer Darrell Cannon explains this process in terms quite similar to Kuiper’s, describing the acquisition and development of linguistic pairs available for immediate recall in the performance of the chant:

As you practice, you will find out for yourself that, ‘nope, that filler doesn’t fit that number, so I need to find one that does.’ And once you do, it’s almost like it’s locked away and you’re able to pull that back out, and you develop that in your chant. You’ll develop a way to say that number that matches your filler word.47

Because linguistic pairs are practiced until they are embedded as psychological units, the auctioneer is able to produce a fluid chant with a variety of fitting filler words and phrases with seemingly little conscious thought. The types of struggles that my fellow student auctioneers and I experienced at World Wide College of Auctioneering reveal what happens when an auctioneer has not developed the sort of filing system described above. With no process limiting the possible filler words to be used in the chant, the range of options was overwhelming to many students. A typical problem encountered by all but the most experienced students—pauses in the chant—was often attributable to the

47 Cannon, interview.
time required to access LTM in search of a filler word or phrase from the hundreds of potential options. Numerous times in my training, having no way to whittle the possibilities down, I slowed down or stopped altogether, trying to determine what word or words I could use to precede the next number. However, as I (and my fellow students) started to find filler words and phrases that were particularly comfortable to us and developed patterns for using those words and phrases, the instances of pausing decreased significantly.

Formulaic pairings, though seemingly unconsciously rendered during a performance, are the result of both practice and aesthetic judgments made by the auctioneer during his development as a bid-caller, and through the accumulated experience of listening to and evaluating the effective practices of fellow auctioneers. The formulaic practices employed by auctioneers are essential to the successful performance of their specialized performance styles. Auctioneer Denise Shearin explains one way in which these formulaic pairs are embedded in her memory as part of a practice regimen, often spurred by the surprise appearance of a new filler word or phrase in her chant:

> What I’ll do is take a few moments right there and just go through the filler word—just repeat that filler word. And then, periodically during that practice session I’ll put some numbers in there and really try to develop the rhythm of that particular filler word so that the next time it comes out, it would be more conscious—as unconscious as bid-calling has to be sometimes. But it will be more conscious to me; it won’t be as much of a surprise to me.48

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48 Shearin, interview.
In Shearin’s description, the development of a filler word in her practice session involves pairing that word (or phrase) with numbers. As part of this practice regimen, she will bind that filler word to those numbers with which it works best—in terms of sound value and fit with the overall rhythmic and metric structure of the bid-call.

**Musical Formulae in the Practice of Auctioneering**

Musical formulae serve much the same function as linguistic formulae in the auctioneer’s chant and can be identified in the same manner. Kuiper’s definition of a linguistic formula can thus be recast as a definition of musical formula in the auction chant:

1. It is a musical gesture consisting of a sequence of rhythms, pitches, or rhythms and pitches.
2. It has musical structure characterized by metric organizations of the beat.
3. It has specific conditions of use, that is, it does particular work for a performer in a given situation.

It is evident from this new definition that both the purpose and function of musical and linguistic formulae are similar. Based on this proposed model for musical formulae, it is possible to identify rhythmic, melodic, and metric gestures that satisfy similar conditions to Kuiper’s linguistic formulae.

Charlie Corkle’s 1952 livestock auction chant (Example 5.1) features a relatively simple rhythmic style with a limited number of rhythmic figures, and
as such, offers an opportunity to examine musical formulae in a bid-call. Most words are performed as individual quarter notes or groups of two eighth notes, and only in limited cases does Corkle employ two sixteenths and an eighth note. The majority of words in the chant are given the same rhythmic treatment with each appearance. For example, “four,” “five,” “six,” and “where” always have the duration of one quarter note, while “fifty,” “hundred,” and “dollar” are always chanted as two eighth notes, and “seventy” always takes the form of two sixteenths and an eighth note. Not only individual words but also entire filler phrases are treated with a formulaic rhythmic approach. The Phrase-length formulae “Do you wanna” and “Do you want ‘em,” are always presented as a grouping of four eighth notes preceding at least two additional eighth notes, and “all in” and “all done,” which always appear as groups of two quarter notes.

Table 5.2 below presents the pairings of filler words, phrases, and numbers in relation to the rhythmic gestures with which each appears in the chant. Even with Corkle’s limited rhythmic vocabulary, some words are bound to more than one rhythmic formula. “And I’m only bid” serves as one example, where the first two quarter notes of the rhythm are, at times, reduced to two eighth notes for a faster rhythmic gesture. “Quarter” is another such example; in most cases, the word is chanted as two eighth notes, but at the end of some phrases (mm. 70, 89, 98, 113, and 134), “quarter” is doubled in duration and stretched out to two quarter notes. The same does not occur with other words, such as “fifty” or “hundred” which could easily be presented in a similar manner.
Table 5.2. Rhythmic Formulae, Charlie Corkle’s Bid-Call

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/Phrase</th>
<th>Rhythmic Formula(e)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Now I’m at</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m bid a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m bid</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>And I’m only bid</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m at</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you wanna bid the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you want</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you want ‘em for the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you wanna bid a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you wanna buy ‘em at</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you wanna give the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you give a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All done</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dollar</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seventy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hundred</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
It appears that Corkle’s style has developed in such a way that the file accessing system (per Kuiper) provides two options for the rhythmic performance of the word “quarter,” but only one option for “fifty” and “hundred.”

Corkle’s example offers relatively little melodic variation from its hum pitch, but in those places where pitch does change, formulaic practice is also evident. In fact, Corkle only deviates from the hum pitch five times in the chant, making the few melodic gestures conspicuous.49 “All in” and “all done” — warnings to the audience that the sale is nearing completion — are both bound to the formulaic melodic gesture of a descending major third. “Sold her,” though only appearing once in the chant, does so in connection with a descending perfect fifth gesture. This melodic gesture does not appear elsewhere in the chant, but Corkle does repeat the same melodic gesture with the same text at the close of the next sale, suggesting that the melodic gesture is a formula common to his sale closing as part of his general chant practice (see chapter 3 for further discussion of opening and closing melodic gestures).

49 In this total, I have not included the hum pitch change in m. 49. This change to the hum pitch remains for the duration of the chant after the change, and is therefore not a melodic gesture or figure, but a whole-step rise in the overall hum pitch itself. It follows a lengthy pause in the bid-call to re-sell the item, a practice common to many auctioneers studied in my fieldwork. It is often the case that an auctioneer will raise or lower the pitch anywhere from a half-step to a major third after pausing. Some auctioneers indicate that this type of hum change creates interesting variety in the chant, while others indicate that moving off of a hum pitch to another pitch can aid in voice preservation over the course of a long sale.
While the first two types of melodic formulae identified in Corkle’s chant pair specific phrases and words with specific melodic patterns, two other melodic gestures are less clearly bound to individual words or phrases. In m. 57 and m. 123, Corkle changes pitch on the numbers “seventy-five” with a descending minor third and “quarter now” with a descending major third. Corkle’s pitch changes may at first seem random and difficult to explain, particularly because he is such a conservative auctioneer in regard to his use of pitches beyond the hum, but investigation into similar cases suggests a pattern of use that is understandable in the context of Corkle’s chant performance. In both cases, the bid number changes immediately after the pitch change, suggesting that a new bid has just been placed. Corkle cannot change to the next number in his chant until he finishes saying (chanting) the current phrase, but he does indicates that the bid has been placed by adding the rising and falling melodic gesture on the number. In essence, then, Corkle is communicating that the “seventy-five” he is calling has just been bid, acknowledging it with a special melodic gesture. Corkle performs the same melodic acknowledgment in later auctions from the 1952 session, providing confirmation that this is common to his chant practice.

As required by condition three of the definition for musical formulae in the auction chant, all of Corkle’s melodic formulae do “particular work” for the performer. Though the first three examples represent melodic gestures bound to specific words and phrases, and while the second two examples are not
specifically tied to particular words or phrases, all are formulaic in regard to their function in the chant. The rare changes in pitch from the hum in all examples alert the bidders to significant changes in the status of the auction. “All in” and “all done” indicate that the auctioneer is approaching the end of the sale and that interested bidders must act quickly. “Sold her” indicates that the sale is complete; no more bids will be accepted, and the legal and financial transaction is being finalized. The “acknowledgment” melodic gestures indicate to the bidder that his bid has been received, while also indicating to the other bidders that the number currently being chanted has been achieved and they must, accordingly, be prepared to increase their bids to stay in the sale.

The definition of musical formula proposed above states that rhythmic and melodic figures may, themselves, be bound to each other in formulaic relationships and not just to specific words or phrases in the bid-call. This is evident in Corkle’s bid-call in some, but not all examples of his musical formulae. “All in,” “all done,” and “sold her” are formulaic not only in the binding of specific melodic contour to particular words or phrases, but the fact that these formulae remain the same in regard to both melodic contour and rhythmic structure at each appearance suggests that these cases represent a formulaic relationship between text, melody, and rhythm. In the case of the

These patterns recur in later sales by Corkle during this 1952 auction recording, suggesting that the formulaic relationship between text, melody and rhythm is part of his practice beyond the example provided in Example 5.1.
“acknowledgment” formulae, the relationship does not extend to all three parameters, however. The rise up and down from a minor or major third as a musical indication of bid receipt changes its rhythmic profile in accordance with the rhythmic formula associated with the text itself.\footnote{51} Thus, in the case of “seventy-five,” the formulaic rhythmic figure of two sixteenths and an eighth note is used, while “quarter now” employs the formulaic figure of two eighths and a quarter note. In both cases, the melodic formula is one of contour rather than rhythmic structure, and thus, the rhythm will vary according to the formulae associated with the text.

Corkle’s musical formulae are more complicated in the realm of meter. He places a slight downbeat emphasis on certain words of the chant, which I have correspondingly indicated as the downbeat of individual measures. The chant moves freely between duple and triple metrical groupings to the extent that we might characterize this example as having two competing referential meters, with a slight preference for triple meter. Switches between meters are not arbitrary, though, because textual cues coincide with Corkle’s metric choices.

In Corkle’s chant, sixty-five percent of the measure’s downbeats coincide with a number (“four,” “five,” “six,” “twenty,” “fifty,” “quarter,” or “half”). This suggests a slight tendency toward linking certain kinds of text with metric emphasis, but does not provide conclusive evidence of one consistent formulaic

\footnote{51} Like other patterns discussed above, these patterns recur throughout the seventeen minutes of the recorded sale as well.
link. Thirty-three percent of the chant’s measures begin with syntactical units which are, themselves, the opening statements of complete sentences: “I’m bid/I’m at,” “Do you want,” “Would you give/would you bid.” These units of text would, understandably, feature an inherent emphasis on the first word of the sentence and, as such, seem to suggest a link between a grammatical and a musically metrical emphasis. Three of the most commonly repeated words in the bid-call—“now,” “bid,” and “hundred,” are never placed on the downbeat of a measure. Rather, these words act as connectors between numbers or other emphasized words. Additionally, through the duration of the chant, Corkle never chants two numbers back-to-back without inserting a connecting word or phrase between the two.

In addition, the fact that many of the word groupings in the text are bound to a specific rhythmic structure (or a limited number of rhythmic structures) through formulaic association reveals patterns in the formation of meter in Corkle’s chant. Meter here results from the deployment of formulaic rhythmic units that, themselves, result in either duple or triple metrical groupings. Corkle almost always starts metric groups with a number or the opening phrase of an independent clause. Once either of these words or phrases is inserted into the ongoing chant, metric organization of the beat arises naturally from the addition of one phrase or word to the next. Phrases such as “five hundred dollar” always creates a triple meter organization and “would you give a” almost always creates a duple meter organization. “Now” fills a particularly
special role in the construction of metric organization in Corkle’s chant, as the word is used not only to fill in gaps between numbers or numbers and filler phrases, but also often fills out the metric grouping of two or three beats, insuring that the chant will continue to move along in one of the two referential meters Corkle employs. “Fifty dollars” fits the duple meter, but “fifty dollars now” (commonly employed throughout) extends the measure one beat, shifting into triple-meter organization. Since “now” is never the initial word of a phrase or metric grouping, its role in facilitating meter shifts is crucial to the formulaic appearance of two referential meters.

Due to the speed and need for continuous flow in auction chant, formulaic structures offer a degree of practical efficiency necessary to maintain the linguistic, rhythmic, and metric demands of the style. Richard Bauman suggests that such a formulaic practice, or parallelism, is common among a variety of verbal arts and that it provides memory aids for the performer:

Parallelism...involves the repetition, with systematic variation, of phonic, grammatical, semantic, or prosodic structures, the combination of invariant and variant elements in the construction of an utterance...From a functional point of view, the persistence of the invariant elements and the structural principles underlying the parallel constructions may serve as mnemonic aids to the performer of a fixed traditional text, or enhance the fluency of the improvisational or spontaneous performance. In either case, the fluent use of language marked by extra regularities is an effective vehicle for the display of communicative competence.52

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52 Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance, 18-19.
In auctioneering, musical parallelism also plays an important role in the fluency of the performing auctioneer. Furthermore, Bauman indicates a connection between improvisational and formulaic practice instead of positing the two as opposing practices. If such a large portion of the auctioneer’s performance can be attributed to formulaic structures, what role does improvisation play and how might we understand the relationship between formulae and improvisation?

**Formulaic Oral Performance, Creativity and Improvisation**

The linguistic and musical formulae employed by an auctioneer constitute a group of strategies: solutions to specific problems in the course of performance. These solutions are so efficient and effective that the auctioneer rarely realizes the complexity of his own formulaic practice, the linguistic-musical pairs embedded in his personal style, or the patterns with which he employs these formulae in the act of performance. Repeatedly in my fieldwork, auctioneers struggled to list the filler words they use daily in their bid-call. When asked to list the filler words most often utilized in his chant, auctioneer Jim Seeck answers, “At this point, I don’t even know what I use to be honest with you. ‘Now’ is still the filler word of choice. And if you listen to a lot of the great auctioneers, they’re using ‘now’ a lot.” Spanky Assiter expresses discomfort

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53 Seeck, interview.
with and regret for his inability to easily produce a list of his most common filler words when asked the same question:

I don’t have time to think about what filler word I’m using. But, what do I use? [Assiter performs little phrases of chant to himself to hear his own filler words]. “I’m…I want…I want thirty-five thousand. And I want.” I use that some. [more chanting to himself] “Here” and “there,” I use that some. I’m trying to do the chant so I can tell you what I’m saying. I apologize. You’d think that, since I’ve been doing this for so long, I could just say, “Yeah, this is what I do.” “Alright, here, there,” [more chanting to himself] “Will you give five,” [more chanting to himself] “Five to bid, five to buy” [more chanting to himself].  

In their inability to immediately identify basic recurring components of their bid-call, both auctioneers express the degree to which formulaic structures become deeply embedded in the auctioneer’s memory. Additionally, the embedding of these formulae are directly connected to the act of performance, so much so that Assiter (and other auctioneers consulted in my fieldwork) actually have had to switch into performance mode in order to reproduce the linguistic and/or musical pairs. Only active performance or practice itself produces the formulaic generation process, allowing the practitioner to recognize his own practice.  

The formulaic structures of auctioneering help to explain the fluency, speed, and “unconscious” construction of the bid-call, but is oral formulaic

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54 Spanky Assiter, interview.

performance—and in particular, the formulaic performance of auctioneering—improvisation? If an auctioneer is not entirely consciously aware of the patterns and formulae he uses, can we characterize the performance practice as an improvised one or is it simply a complex form of data processing? Does an auctioneer possess creative agency within a practice organized primarily by formulaic process? Kuiper and Haggo offer conflicting opinions on the issue. In their study of livestock auctioneering, they comment:

…creativity within the tradition, does not appear to be attained often in the case of livestock auctioneers or, more accurately, few auctions display creativity within the tradition. The reasons for this are obvious. One can sell livestock perfectly well without it, and aesthetic considerations are nowhere near as important as the ability to sell at the best price. Nevertheless, at least one auctioneer in North Canterbury appears to have attained this stage. He seems to have formulae of his own and to be at times extremely creative in his use of them.56

Kuiper and Haggo leave the matter of creativity here, with no further examination of the North Canterbury case. Their assessment of creativity echoes a great deal of scholarship on formulaic performance. As R. Anderson Sutton states, “Again, the prevailing scholarly discourse on music, largely Western-dominated, has tended to equate use of formulas with a lack of creativity, as if the formulas were the lazy way to make up a piece or make one’s way through a

56 Kuiper and Haggo, 224.
piece.”57 While Kuiper and Haggo do not characterize the auctioneer’s process as “lazy” and in fact go to great lengths to show the complex role that short term and long term memory play in the “chunking” of formulae for use in bid-calling, they avoid consideration of the presence of creativity within this practice. Their limited assessment of creativity seems to hinge on the extent to which auctioneers employ self-created formulae, and, in the case of linguistic formulae, it may indeed be true that most auctioneers employ a limited variety of them, often learned and reproduced from the performances of mentor auctioneers. Such an assessment of creativity is problematic, though, as it is presumably based on the invention of newly created formulae preceding the act of performance. If, as Kuiper and Haggo argue, formulae are developed through practice and repetition as the auctioneer acquires performance skills, then the creative act would, instead, occur during the skills acquisition and style development phases in an auctioneer’s career, when he invents formulae of his own design. The singular act of performance, however, would be no more or no less creative than that of any other auctioneer who utilizes pre-existing or commonly used formulae.

Musical formulae in the practice of auctioneering demonstrate that the auctioneer is engaged in a characteristically creative endeavor. Each auctioneer

may use common linguistic structures in the chant, but no two auctioneers create
the same musical frames or patterns for these formulae. According to Kuiper
and Haggo’s qualifications for creativity, and extending their argument to
include musical formulae, auctioneers demonstrate a rich creative process when
they fuse linguistic patterns (newly invented or copied from pre-existing models)
with musical formulae in a manner unique to their own style.

In his study of Javanese gamelan, Sutton suggests that the question of
creativity in predominantly formulaic performance relates to the manner in
which formulae and patterns are arranged:

This inventiveness may be evident in the choice of “building blocks” or
musical “formulas,” and in the manipulation and alternation of these
units from one instance to the next. Musical improvisation, then, is not
free expression constrained only by the inspiration of the moment, but a
complex and multilevel process, one that must be learned and practised.58

For Sutton, creativity and formulaic practice are not mutually exclusive. Rather,
the creative act occurs in the structuring, juxtaposition, and connection of
formulaic materials in the act of performance. Such a creative process exists in
auctioneering, wherein a complex and interconnected web of linguistic and
musical formulae are employed in subtle variation, alternation, repetition, and
contrast to both invite the bidding audience into the performer’s musical space
and to excite and surprise the audience throughout the sale. The nature of the
relationship between formulaic and improvised practice in auctioneering cannot

58 Ibid., 71.
be resolved with Sutton’s theory, but it does seem to qualify as creative to an extent beyond that granted by Kuiper and Haggo.

Creativity in the performance of the bid-call is evident not only in the variety of distinct musical formulae employed by each auctioneer, but by the non-linguistic demands placed on the auctioneer in the act of performance. The strategic employment of both linguistic and musical formulaic structures in the bid-call are born of a need to creatively handle the ever-changing dynamics of the live auction scenario. These formulae appear in the bid-call as immediate reactions to information presented to the auctioneer, but any consideration of the improvisatory function of the formulaic practices of the auctioneer must contextualize the “text” of the chant (including both linguistic and musical formulae) with the social, cultural, and inter-personal dynamics present in the live sale event.

**Non-Linguistic Pressures in Auction Performance**

While formulaic structures abound in bid-calling, the practice of auctioneering is a temporal one, which, due to its fundamentally unpredictable nature, requires the auctioneer to remain flexible enough to employ formulaic structures in unforeseen manners. As an example, at the most basic level, an auctioneer does not know how long he will need to remain on “five dollars” during a given sale, and as such, must be ready to shift to new formulae or incorporate improvisatory strategies at all times. The auctioneer is no more privy to the unfolding structure of the bid-call than the audience. Charles Smith
reminds us that the actions and decisions of the bidding audience, are, themselves, shaped by the emergent character of the live auction when he states, “In most real auctions—in contrast to auction models—participants seldom have established preferences; they don’t enter auctions knowing the specific prices they are willing to pay. What broad expectations each person has regarding price tend to be shared with the other auction participants and grounded in collective opinions and views, which are themselves subject to modification by what occurs in the auction.”59 The bidders’ choices, then, are changed during the auction based on the actions of fellow bidders.

The temporal nature of auctioneering requires improvisational strategy and because the hallmark of auctioneering is continuous, fast musical chant, the auctioneer must rely on a constant interchange between formulaic structures and improvised variety and interjection in the same chant. The practical impetus for musical decisions in the auction chant performance may indeed be one of the reasons that audiences, scholars, and auctioneers alike have not yet given substantial consideration to the musical and improvisatory nature of the practice. Because the formulaic musical structures of the bid-call are employed as part of an improvisatory practice, itself informed by extra-musical cues from the sale process, the motivations for improvisatory choices in the act of performance must be understood within the context of those extra-musical pressures.

Kuiper’s study acknowledges that an auctioneer’s performance is not determined by linguistic pressures alone, but rather is additionally influenced by what he terms “non-linguistic” pressures. Kuiper identifies the following nonlinguistic pressures on the auctioneer: bid spotting, interaction with ringmen, characteristics of professional versus general audience buyers, audience need for entertainment, the need to maintain the pace and rhythm of the chant, and observing legal responsibilities.\textsuperscript{60} Because Kuiper’s primary interest is in the linguistic construction of the bid-call, he does not attempt a cultural or sociological examination of auction dynamics, nor does he seek to connect formulaic structures in the bid-call to aspects other than time pressure. Indeed, if Kuiper’s oral formulaic model leaves little room for performer creativity, it may be due to the fact that his analysis stops short of considering the complex social, personal, and psychological factors present in a live auction.

The performing auctioneer acts as a hub for a massive amount of incoming and outgoing data, and the most important stream of information coming in to the auctioneer and to which the auctioneer must remain constantly attentive is the bid status—the dollar amount of the last bid, the increment with which the bid is advancing, and the next bid desired. The auctioneer must also constantly compare this information to the assessed or expected value (the value the auctioneer believes the item to have or the reserve amount below which the

\textsuperscript{60} Kuiper, 36-7.
seller will not part with the item). The performing auctioneer processes a great deal more information than the numbers, though, and these non-numerical pieces of information are essential components in the improvisatory process. In order to structure an effective musical event in the form of the bid-call, the auctioneer must perceive, synthesize, analyze, and act upon a seemingly overwhelming amount of additional data. What the auctioneer takes from these additional sources of information helps to determine how to vary the chant to effectively excite the audience, incite more bidding, increase competition between active bidders, and negotiate any problems that may arise during the auction. All of this, of course, must happen while the chant continues.

During the auction, an auctioneer must constantly assess the audience for indications of interest in the item up for sale, interpreting a number of pieces of data in order to determine how best to conduct the sale. Bidding cues differ between auction-goers, as do bidding styles, and the auctioneer must attempt to determine each bidder’s style and type of bidding cue in order to best communicate with the individuals in competition for an item. Bidders may indicate bids with a raised paddle or bidder-number card, a raised hand, a shake of a closed fist, a tipped hat, a nod, an eye wink, a shout or cry, or a slight eye movement or eye contact made with the auctioneer or ringman. While the enthusiastic bidder may make a show of the raised bidder card, or even jump out of his seat to make a bid, these bidders cannot distract the auctioneer to the extent that he misses the more subtle cues of other bidders.
Many audience members who place bids early on in the bidding process do so with little or no intention of buying the item. These bidders enjoy participating in the auction and may enjoy the thought of winning an item for an exceptionally low price, but once the bidding progresses to higher prices, these bidders stop bidding, leaving only the interested buyers to compete for the final price. The auctioneer must attend to these opening bidders, but at the same time, must try to determine who the actual interested bidders are. These initial “fun bidders,” while rarely serious about purchasing the item, are crucial for the auctioneer’s performance, as they provide immediate momentum and energy at the start of the auction. A skilled auctioneer will take these bids as fast as possible to provide a sense of urgency for the audience. An auctioneer familiar with his bidders will typically know who these early “fun bidders” are and will integrate this knowledge into his scan of the crowd, making sure to keep an eye out for those buyers who generally do not enter into a bid without the hope of winning the item.

The opening structure of the bid-call varies significantly between auctioneers, depending on how they choose to utilize the “fun bidders” as part of the sale. An auctioneer can start a sale at a very low price and work up quickly, start at a moderate price near the expected value of the item but still a “bargain” price, or start at a higher price that indicates what the auctioneer thinks the item should ultimately sell for. Auctioneers who start the bidding at extremely low prices rely on the initial momentum of bargain bidders to bring immediate
excitement to the auction. Conversely, an auctioneer who starts sales at high prices will not grab the initial flurry of low-price bidders, but rather must backtrack downward toward an acceptable opening price until she hits a low enough number to satisfy the audience, thus initiating the bid-call with a very different and less interactive character than the first auctioneer. The auctioneer who starts high and descends to the opening bid will usually generate excited bidding once he hits a low price, but does not achieve that momentum from the start.

It is not uncommon to encounter the “sleeper bidder” — a bidder who shows no sign of interest nor places a bid until the very end of the sale. Sleeper bidders are serious buyers who only bid when they intend to buy an item, and as such, the auctioneer must attend to them carefully when they enter the auction. The auctioneer must be attuned to the nonverbal cues that the sleeper bidder provides, though, because these bidders may be of two types: the bidder who enjoys the drama of appearing late in the action and the bidder who wants as little attention as possible. Both personality types can result in sleeper bidding, and the auctioneer must be careful to read the bidder’s type correctly. The sleeper bidder who enjoys the drama of a late appearance in the competition will likely respond well to dramatic attention from the auctioneer, who can play off of the bidder’s personality. In this situation, the auctioneer may interject comments into the chant about the surprise of the new bidder’s entrance, the change in the competition, and the danger that this new bidder poses to the existing bidders.
Because this type of sleeper bidder likes the attention, he is likely to respond to it with continued bidding, perhaps even over the amount he had intended to bid.

Conversely, the second type of sleeper bidder is a serious bidder who attends the auction not for the drama, entertainment, or social interactions of the event, but simply to purchase a needed item for a specific price. These bidders are practical and stoic in their approach to bidding and often have a very clear price in mind, beyond which they will not bid regardless of the encouragement of the auctioneer or ringmen. They refrain from bidding early on to stay out of the competitive drama of the bidding until the price approaches their intended range (based on the bidder’s assessment of the item’s value, this range will be close to what the bidder thinks the final price will be). Only at this time does the bidder place a bid, often with a subtle bidding cue—further evidence of the bidder’s desire to draw as little attention to himself as possible. The skilled auctioneer will not interject comical asides or otherwise publically prod this type of bidder to raise his or her bid, as this attention is exactly what the bidder typically tries to avoid.

Many of the bidding behaviors to which the auctioneer must attend during the course of a sale are facilitated by his accumulated knowledge of the scenarios described above and the specific familiarity he develops with his bidding audience over time. Depending on auction type, auctioneers may know every member of the bidding audience or only some. It is highly unusual for an auctioneer to conduct a sale without knowing any of the bidders present.
Familiarity with bidders is essential in order to predict many of the behavior patterns discussed above and these predictions will affect the improvisatory choices the auctioneer makes in the structure and performance of the bid-call.

Auction house owner Darrah Williams explains how familiarity with her audience shapes the bid-call:

One of the biggest keys for me that I think helped was that I knew almost everybody’s name that was in my audience. If I didn’t know them and there was somebody that was new to our auction crowd and seemed to be a pretty active bidder, I might send a note to my clerk, “Who’s bidder number 87? What’s his name?” Or, “Who’s that guy over there against the wall? Find out who that is.” And then my cashier would send up a note, “That’s Bob Smith, or that’s Mary Jones.” And once you can involve them in the chant and get them so they feel like you’re talking directly to them, I mean, “come on Bob, one more time, let’s do it.” That adds a lot to your chant without really breaking your rhythm or that sort of thing. It sort of personalizes it and motivates them to action.\(^\text{61}\)

Williams’ comment suggests that stored knowledge of the bidding audience translates into musical material to be incorporated into the chant at strategic moments. She is able to weave direct commentary and communication with individual bidders into her chant without “breaking rhythm,” by which I understand her to mean the ongoing pulse and established meter of the bid-call. Additionally, her example: “come on Bob, one more time, let’s do it,” would be an effective rhetorical device because it acknowledges and encourages Bob’s interest directly. Because Williams knows the bidder, we can assume that she knows more than just his name, but rather has acquired some knowledge of his

\(^{61}\) Williams, interview.
buying interests and bidding habits to the extent that she can judge an effective sales push for him. She might joke more openly with a bidder she knows enjoys attention more than Bob, or she might simply acknowledge a different bidder by name without pushing any further if she knows the bidder to be a sleeper or otherwise averse to extra attention. Because Williams stresses the fact that these comments or asides are incorporated into the chant, we can understand them as improvisatory interjections that, though seemingly spontaneous, are derived from a well of stored knowledge about and familiarity with individual bidders.

Auctioneer Nelson Aumann describes a similar practice when he comments, “If somebody walks in that I recognize and I haven’t seen for quite a while, I’ll say, ‘Jim, how are you doing today?’ And I don’t want to break—and I don’t break my rhythm as I do that.”

Both auctioneers stress that these types of interjections are conducted as part of the ongoing chant, and thus, are unplanned, improvised linguistic and musical structures inserted into the bid-call in progress.

62 Aumann, interview.

63 Similar communicative interjections appear in many examples of bid-calling when auctioneers send messages to ringmen as improvised additions to their bid-call. Spanky Assiter comments: “And a lot of times, you’ll hear in our chant, we’re communicating with our ringman. ‘Where are we man?’ you know. We say that, and then now, three of the four men will point at one guy. They’ll say, ‘Clint out there’s got the bid,’ you know, because I had so many things going on I forgot which bidder assistant had it. So you’ll say, ‘where are you man?’ and you know, a couple of them will hear you and they’ll point at the guy, or the guy that has it will raise his hand or something. Because you’ve just got too many
Many auctioneers will not know every audience member by name; when this is the case, the auctioneer must be attuned to non-verbal cues that might indicate what type of bidder an individual is and what social and inter-personal dynamics are at play in a given auction. The auctioneer can accumulate a great deal of information about the bidders at a sale within the first few lots of an auction; of course, he must do so while performing the bid-call. It is his task, then, to store this information for recall concurrently with the ongoing sale.

Thus, an auctioneer must be a student of human behavior on the auction block, as each sale represents an unfolding social drama to which the auctioneer may or may not be privy, and the manner in which the auctioneer handles the inter-personal dynamics of a sale can affect bidding behavior and ultimately price. Due to the rapid pace of the bid-call and the need for continuous chant, many subtle social situations must be addressed carefully and effectively in order to encourage all participants to bid as high and as often as possible. At the basic level, every auction is a competition, and at times, this competition is personal.

Automobile auctioneer Scott Goodhue reveals an important facet of the competition inherent in the auction setting when he states, “we’re pitting—you’ve got a bunch of men, like here; you’ve got more men than not with egos. things going on at once.” Spanky Assiter, interview. Here Assiter expresses the fact that communication with ringmen is integrated into the chant, though in my research I have witnessed these comments as both integrated chant phrases and as spoken asides.
So we’re playing ego against ego. You know, it’s exciting.”64 Goodhue’s comment reveals a subtle understanding of a critical social dynamic at play in the auction house and a critique of gender-based behaviors witnessed over years selling from the auction block. He speaks here of the automobile auction community where the vast majority of buyers are men, but his comments could easily apply to other auctions where male buyers are the norm (tobacco, livestock, agricultural real estate and equipment, and commercial equipment). Goodhue sees a special kind of competition in these male-dominated fields, where the desire to attain the item for sale is complicated by the buyers’ interest in what their bidding behavior communicates to other buyers. Sociologist Charles Smith likewise notes the significant role that competition assumes in bidding behaviors:

In cases of personal aggrandizement, or what have been called ‘tournament[s] of values,’ what tends to be most important is the social context within which the auction occurs. The motivation for a bid is often stimulated by competition with others. Rather than resolving such competitions, auctions become the context for promoting them…But their egos play a major role, linking a positive self-image or identity with successful bidding.”65

If the auctioneer is able to excite the personal competition of egos between two buyers, he may convince one or both to bid higher than they otherwise would in

64 Scott Goodhue, interview with Nicole Malley, September 1, 2010. When Goodhue references “here,” he is referring to the Mannheim Denver Automobile Auction, where the interview was conducted.

65 Smith, 34.
order to project a specific image of power or domination over the losing buyer.

From the auction block, Goodhue, like any good auctioneer, witnesses patterns of behavior—here identifiable to him as a gender-specific phenomenon—and finds ways to use this behavioral information in the creation of an effective bid-call.

To excite or fuel a battle of egos on the auction block, an auctioneer will find ways to put pressure on two especially competitive buyers during the bid-call. This pressure could result from repeated references to the buyer’s by name in the bid-call (effectively making the sale about the winning individual, not the item or the business that the buyer represents), reference to the competing bidder’s interest and tenacity, speeding up the bid-call to create a feeling of urgency, or pausing altogether to force the competing bidders to confront each other in a moment of awkward silence. These tactics and more are seamlessly woven into the bid-call, the result of years of careful study from the auctioneer-cum-sociologist on the block.66

66 The role of competition, though always present in an auction, varies between types of auctions. At professional buyers’ auctions, the buyers are likely to know each other or, at the very least, know the businesses that the buyers represent. Each auction, then, carries with it a subtext (or subtexts) wherein interpersonal and inter-business dynamics may affect buying decisions as much as the quality of the items for sale. A struggling business may have a vested interest in spending money visibly (by dominating a series of sales in a row, or by bidding liberally—even over the commonly assessed value of an item) to assuage rumors of trouble. An industry or community power-player’s buying habits may suggest market trends to other buyers and affect their decision making. If, for example, the most successful car dealership in the area is buying every available
An example from my fieldwork will offer insight into just some of the unspoken drama present on auction day and the effect of the extra-musical events on the bid-call. On October 2, 2010, auctioneer Jim Seeck conducted the sale of two hundred and ninety pieces of Carnival Art Glass from the Whittley estate.\textsuperscript{67} The Whittleys’ collection of Carnival Art Glass was well known within the community of Carnival collectors, and many pieces were extremely rare and thus highly coveted among the collecting community. Before the auction, Seeck estimated that collectors from thirty-five to forty states would be present at the auction and that he would know approximately ninety percent of the bidders.\textsuperscript{68} Seeck, though trained to conduct a variety of auctions, currently specializes in Carnival art glass and Watt pottery auctions, traveling around the country for these sales. He has become familiar with the tight-knit communities of specialty collectors who will often attend numerous sales in various regions during the course of a year. Because the specialty collectible market includes many one-of-a-kind and rare items, and because the collecting community is small, bidders at Ford truck, other buyers will take notice and may change buying priorities accordingly.

\textsuperscript{67} Carnival art glass is a type of glassware characterized by an iridescent finish, produced in the United States before the Great Depression (with some limited production after the 1930s). The initial interest in the style resulted in overproduction that flooded the market. When interest in the style waned, manufacturers sold most of their inventory to carnivals, which used the glassware as prizes, and thus the name Carnival affixed itself to the style.

\textsuperscript{68} Seeck, interview.
an auction are well-aware of the provenance of an item, who wants a particular item for their personal collection, how much a similar item sold for at a previous auction, which collectors will buy something they want regardless of the price, and which collectors harbor competitive relationships with other potential bidders. Seeck explains:

You know the guys that you can push a little bit. You know the guys that are firm in their price, and they’re gonna go to that price, and they’re gonna stop. That helps me. And you also know the guy who is a buyer who’s gonna buy it under the money or not gonna buy it. So when you’re at the money, you don’t even look at him any more; you go look somewhere else. It definitely helps to know who your crowd is, and their tendencies. And you know, going into the auction, I pretty much know who’s gonna buy the big ticket items, or are gonna be players in the big ticket items. And those are things, are something, that comes with experience.69

The big-ticket item at the Whitley sale was lot number ten, a one-of-a-kind cracker jar, selling for $67,500. Seeck mentioned the item to me before the sale, commenting that the entire collecting community was excited to see this item up for sale, and they were just as curious to see who would acquire it. During the sale of lot ten, Seeck stretched the sale out over fifty-seven seconds as compared to his average rate of sale of twenty to thirty-five seconds, drawing out the final three bid increments almost twice as long as he customarily does on an item of lesser value and audience interest. Seeck opened with an asking price of fifty

69 Ibid. When Seeck talks about being “on the money” he means that the bidding on an item has reached the value at which the auctioneer and the (informed) audience believes it to be worth. A buyer who only buys “under the money” is looking for a deal and will only buy an item when he feels he is getting it for a bargain price.
thousand dollars, received no bids and jumped down to ten thousand. Working back up from ten thousand he spent only half of the sale’s duration spanning ten thousand to sixty-five thousand. The last twenty-eight seconds of the sale were spent moving from sixty-five thousand to sixty-seven thousand five hundred dollars. Seeck would never take so much time for one incremental increase in a normal sale, but in such a special case, he was willing and able to expand his bid-call to encourage additional bidding on a prized and especially expensive item. Additionally, he employed a more varied tempo on this sale than others at the auction, frequently speeding up considerably after the receipt of a new bid, only to settle back into his original tempo within three to four seconds. Normally, Seeck’s tempo is quite consistent throughout a sale, but in this special case, tempo became an improvisatory tool, capable of expressing the intensity of this particular sale.

The auctioneer must consider all of the interpersonal, historical, economic, competitive, and emotional dynamics in play during a sale while performing a continuous chant. Additionally, the auctioneer must process this information, analyze it for meaningful cues about what to do next in the chant, and translate it into musical material. The improvisatory decisions the auctioneer makes in the act of performance are based on his ability to manage this information and transform it into musical patterns, rhythms, changes in pitch and inflection, and modes of expression. It is the synthesis of these practical, commercial, social, and
transactional components with the musical structure of the bid-call that characterize the auctioneer’s performance practice.

Improvisatory Strategies of the Auctioneer

The danger with an oral formulaic analytical model for auctioneering is that the model itself equates the performer to a processing machine, fusing stored chunks of linguistic or musical information in direct and predictable reaction to increases in bidding. Pierre Bourdieu comments on this type of mechanistic analysis of practice when he states, “It is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies, ‘models’ or ‘rôles’…”70 Rather, the practice of the auctioneer is one of improvised, strategic employment of both formulaic and newly-invented materials.

While the amount of formulaic material clearly outweighs the amount of newly created material (chanted interjections, spontaneous rhythmic or melodic changes from formulaic models, etc.) in any auction chant, the practice of auctioneering is characterized by the creative synthesis of both types of materials; thus, Bourdieu’s term “strategy” is most apt in describing the improvisational choices of the auctioneer. Bourdieu explains, “To substitute strategy for the rule is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, its

70 Bourdieu, 73.
irreversibility."\textsuperscript{71} The ever-changing demands and developments in the live auction are unique to each sale, and as such, no set of rules can account for every problem, every combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors, or every social relationship. The concept of strategy encompasses the temporal nature of the practice, accounting for the fact that the auction chant cannot be pre-determined, nor can it be pre-composed. Rather, the chant must evolve as the events of the sale evolve. A strategic approach to the performance of the bid-call allows the auctioneer to be a performing problem solver at each moment in the sale.

Speed is essential for the auctioneer, and indeed, is one of the most iconic aspects of the style. Speed is also a strategic device, though, as many auctioneers expressed in interviews. Jim Seeck comments, “We move it along fairly quickly. It’s part of the psychological game the auctioneer plays with the crowd. If you go slow, if you give people too much time to think about spending money, they tend not to spend money. So, you don’t want to give them the time to change their mind.”\textsuperscript{72} Seeck indicates one of the primary functions of the characteristic speed of the auctioneer is its ability to express a sense of urgency while creating a continuous sound world for the listener such that his ability to consider his buying choices is limited. Auctioneer Darrell Cannon articulates the same

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{72} Seeck, interview.
sentiment when he states, “You just keep that rhythm going. You don’t want them to be able to get up out of their seat and do something else.”\textsuperscript{73} Paul Behr relates speed to urgency like Cannon and Seeck, but further associates speed with regulated organization of the beat, or the auctioneers’ preferred term, “rhythm”:

> Probably the purpose of having speed or sounding fast in an auction chant is to create rhythm, and rhythm creates enthusiasm, and enthusiasm creates an immediacy about buying an item or selling an item. You know, when a buyer knows that in twenty seconds, they’re going to have to make a decision on whether they want to buy that car, that piece of furniture, or that piece of real estate, they don’t have five days or twenty days to decide. So I think it creates immediacy. The speed creates immediacy and people act on that, and that kind of creates one of the factors that auctions are all about.\textsuperscript{74}

Auctioneers vary speed strategically within the bid-call as well. When asked if she changes the speed of her chant at any time, Darrah Williams replied, “Oh definitely. Just like if you were conducting an orchestra. When you speed it up, you know, the crowd kind of perks up.”\textsuperscript{75} When asked what tools an auctioneer might use to influence or otherwise direct events in a sale, 2007 World Champion Automobile Ringman, Vaughn Long answered, “Speed too. If things are real draggy, kind of liven it up,” to which 2006 World Automobile Auctioneer Champion Scott Goodhue interjected, “Momentum, momentum,

\textsuperscript{73} Cannon, interview.

\textsuperscript{74} Behr, interview.

\textsuperscript{75} Williams, interview.
momentum, momentum.” Much like the term rhythm, the word “speed” is used in the auction community with a general understanding among practitioners that differs from the term’s use in musical communities. When auctioneers discuss increasing speed as a performance strategy, they may mean one of two things: an increase in tempo or the incorporation of faster subdivisions of the beat by means of fast rhythmic gestures. My research and fieldwork suggest that the overwhelming majority of auctioneers do not vary tempo much if at all during the course of individual sales, nor does tempo vary considerably between sales. However, it is not uncommon to find an auctioneer employing faster subdivisions of the beat within the constant tempo at points in the sale when he wants to liven up the audience or otherwise attract their attention.

The use of speed variation as an improvisational strategy differs by auction type. Both Darrell Cannon and Denise Shearin have commented that real estate auctions incorporate greater variations in speed than other auction types, and given the special pressures present in the real estate auction, this makes sense. The real estate auctioneer, tasked with selling fewer lots per hour

76 Vaughn Long and Scott Goodhue, interview with Nicole Malley, Denver, CO, September 1, 2010. This interview was conducted with a group of auctioneers associated with the automobile auction profession and employed at Manheim Auctions in Denver, Colorado. The group included Long, Goodhue, and 1979 World Livestock Auctioneer Champion Terry Elson.

77 Williams and Cannon, interviews.
than any other auction type, is thus required to remain on one number for much longer than auctioneers in any other setting. Darrah Williams states it bluntly when she comments, “You can only say the same thing so many ways before it’s either going to go or it’s not.” The real estate auctioneer, aware of this problem and under specific demands to remain on the same number for minutes at a time, must appeal to other tactics in order to keep the “same thing” from sounding redundant during such lengthy time spans. Varied speed is one effective strategy for addressing the challenge that the real estate sales rate creates for the auctioneer, and thus, is more often utilized in this setting. Conversely, the least variety in speed (both in regard to tempo and internal rhythmic gestures) appears in tobacco auctions, where the length of each sale may vary by only a second or two, and the auctioneer is not tasked with remaining on any individual number for more than one or two seconds. Maintenance of the tempo and relative rhythmic homogeneity facilitates the extremely fast sales rate and keeps the mobile bidding crowd on task to complete all sales within a very restricted time frame.

Although the very nature of the bid-call depends on a continuous flow of rhythmic chant, silence is one of the most common improvisational strategies mentioned by auctioneers when speaking about their practice. Perhaps because the expected musical structure of the auction chant is continuous, cessation, the

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78 Williams, interview.
negation of the comfortable, familiar condition of the auction, is all the more jarring to the audience. Darrah Williams states, “Stopping is a very good technique. Just stopping. And just starting again—once you have their attention. If it’s this constant drone for an hour and a half and all of a sudden there’s silence, you will see people turn their heads and say ‘hey, what’s going on? Something’s different.’” Spanky Assiter indicates the special social pressure that silence can create in an auction when he comments, “You can use silence to create tension or a tool to motivate some people. Because if you stop bidding and look at them and are completely quiet and everybody gets to looking at them, maybe it’s an embarrassment thing, it’s a pressure, you know, a pressure to bid again.” 

Not only is the listener’s expectation frustrated by the change in the ongoing chant, but the decision to implement silence becomes a communicative tool, creating pressure through the absence of sound. No longer is the bidder shielded by the barrage of chant, but rather, is (by inference) the cause for the cessation of the chant.

Darrell Cannon emphasizes the improvisatory nature of silence as a performance strategy when he states

Do we use silence? Yes...It may be that you are in some heated bidding and you can’t get that person off dead-center at the end, and you know it’s time to sell ‘em out. You can use it then. And that’s something you have to decide on the fly. There’s nothing you can premeditate there. It’s just something—you read the crowd.  

79 Spanky Assiter, interview.

80 Cannon, interview.
Cannon suggests that the strategic use of silence as an improvisatory tool is only effective in specific situations that the auctioneer determines solely on the basis of the sales dynamics in play in the moment. Where and when an auctioneer employs silence are determined by the way in which the auctioneer synthesizes the various pieces of information about buying behavior, individual bidding style, and the social, historical and economic conditions of the sale in progress.

Melodic variety is yet another improvisational tool available to the auctioneer during the sale. While it is true that many melodic gestures can be attributed to formulaic structures bound to specific linguistic formulae in the bid-call, the choice to employ auxiliary pitches beyond the hum pitch is, itself, a strategic act. Furthermore, an auctioneer may choose to implement non-formulaic pitch variation into a chant, or change the hum pitch during a bid-call. When discussing pitch, melodic gesture, and hum variation, auctioneers often use the same term “inflection” to express one or more of these elements. Asked if there are elements of his chant that he manipulates to deal with issues or problems in a sale, Darrell Cannon replied:

Yeah. Inflection. You know, that sense of urgency. You know, that other person’s gonna get you right away, so you better get in there and keep it going if they’re stalling out a little bit, and you know you’re way off the money. But, if you can put some inflection there or a sales pitch, but, I mean, a short sales pitch...81

81 Cannon, interview.
When asked to clarify whether he actually changes pitch during the sale, Cannon added:

Only if we’re using a little inflection because of maybe what’s going on at the time. But no, because I don’t want to burn out, burn the voice, or the vocal chords...I typically won’t. During the sale, there’s going to be some ups and downs, you know, just because of the salesmanship part of it, but on a level, no, you would be selling in the same hum or tone at the end that you were in the beginning...You don’t want to be monotone. It may be just boppin’ up and down, playing with the people a little bit, you know.82

Cannon’s comments at first appear contradictory, but his use of the term inflection provides a key to understanding his meaning. For Cannon, inflection means a momentary leap to a pitch other than the hum pitch. When asked if he changes pitch, Cannon replies that he does not, indicating that the hum pitch remains fundamentally the same, but that momentary deviations from the hum pitch are useful tools for indicating urgency to the bidder.

Auctioneers further qualify the nature of some pitch change and melodic variety — identified as inflection — by the use of the term “octave.” The word is used in a profession-specific sense to indicate any type of intervallic leap, not a specific interval of twelve semitones. Darrah Williams states:

Also the inflection and the tone are almost the key. If you’re selling pretty low and then all of a sudden you go up an octave or go up a notch, that’ll change. So speed and tone really have a big influence on how you’re selling. When you’re on a roll, you just keep on that same roll, but sometimes you need a little bit different inflection in your voice. You need to go up a little, go down a little, speed up a little, slow down a little. That all helps kind of pace the auction and keep people enthused.

82 Ibid.
Otherwise you might as well just, you know, have a record on going over and over and over.\textsuperscript{83}

Auctioneer Jim Seeck also mentions “changing octaves” as an effective technique,\textsuperscript{84} but research data suggests that octave leaps are one of the more rare pitch variations employed by auctioneers. Far more common are descending and ascending leaps of major and minor thirds, though no auctioneer in my research qualified their pitch changes using such intervallic terminology. Seeck’s chant style, for example, includes frequent intervallic leaps of fourths and fifths, but rarely, if ever, does he employ an actual octave. Thus, the term “octave,” though commonly used by auctioneers to describe pitch change or “inflection” indicates disjunct pitch change itself, but not necessarily any specific interval of change.

The common denominator in all aspects of improvisational strategy discussed above is that of change. Denise Shearin explains, “I think the variety is great. And like I said, if you can keep that variety in there with these surprise filler words, by developing different filler words and practicing them, that it will be conscious, but still a bit unconscious at the same time.”\textsuperscript{85} Darrah Williams specifies the component of change in her comments about speed and rhythm, stating, “If the pace changes, I guess, is what I want to get at, if you’re selling at

\textsuperscript{83} Williams, interview.

\textsuperscript{84} Seeck, interview.

\textsuperscript{85} Shearin, interview.
the same pace (bingety, bangety, bingety, bangety), and all of a sudden you
change that pace, that sometimes can perk them up, because their ear is not
accustomed to that."86 Both auctioneers describe the inclusion of variety and
surprise into an otherwise formulaic and patterned performance. The tension
created by the interjection of any manifestation of change or variety engages the
audience by playing with expectations about those aspects of the auction chant
with which the listener has become comfortable. Indeed, these aspects of change,
from silence to rhythm to melody, offer musical variety that allows each sale to
adhere both to the general formulaic guidelines of the practice, but also to stand
out as a unique musical event from all other sales. In addition, these
improvisational choices are not simply reactions to the evolving sale conditions,
but are strategies employed by the auctioneer to affect the sale itself.

If the ultimate goal in an auction is to achieve the highest price possible
for each item, then the musical strategies employed by the auctioneer must be in
service to that goal. Almost every auctioneer I spoke with during my research
indicated that the bid-call’s ability to facilitate successful sales hinges on its
capacity to create excitement in the bidding audience. Further, auctioneers
articulate a correlation between the incorporation of variety in the chant and the
ability to generate enthusiasm in the live auction. Darrah Williams states:

I haven’t found one yet that can generate the excitement and the
adrenaline rush from both sides, whether you’re a buyer or a seller that a

86 Williams, interview.
live auction can. I mean, nobody gets too excited to walk into Kohls or Walmart or Target. So when you go to an auction, you get excited. You’re anxious. You don’t know if you’re going to get the item that you want. You don’t know how much it’s going to go for. There is that element of anticipation and surprise that nothing else can really compare to. It’s very hands-on; it’s very tactile. It’s very visual. There’s a lot of senses that are involved and it’s a heck of a lot more interesting than sitting behind a computer screen clicking.87

Strategic use of musical and linguistic variety and the surprises inherent in the improvisatory practice of bid-calling generate the thrill of the live auction, as Jim Seeck explains when asked what techniques he finds most successful in his performance of the auction chant: “Changing octaves, things like that, you know. Getting excited up there myself. If I’m excited, the crowd’s excited. If you’re not excited, the crowd isn’t. That’s a big part of it. Now you just have to be having fun up there.”88

Seeck provided an example from his own career to explain how excitement in the form of improvised variety relates directly to both the success of individual sales and the success of an auctioneer’s career:

My voice is quite exciting. I put a lot of excitement in my voice. I work hard up there. I make it look like I’m having fun. And then there’s this gentleman who would sit behind the mic, talk in a monotone voice and auction along. And what happened, over a few years, the crowd who were the consignors—each member got to put an item into the convention auction. And the convention wanted really great things put in, but the people who had the real great things would come up to the board of directors of the association and say, “Listen, I’ll put these great things into the auction only if Jim sells ‘em. If John sells ‘em, I don’t want John to sell

87 Williams, interview.

88 Seeck, interview.
my item.” And that pretty much answers what excitement can do. I would be on the block and selling; people would be sitting up on the edge of their seat watching what was going on, paying attention. John would get up and in a matter of three lots, they’re sitting back in their seat. They’re bored, and they’re ready to leave. A good auctioneer has an exciting chant and makes it exciting. If you make it exciting, you’ll have success. That’s the bottom line.89

Seeck’s comment suggests that an auctioneer’s success in the profession can be either positively or negatively affected by the extent to which he is able to utilize the improvisational strategies discussed above in the creation of the auction chant.

The very success of the auction depends on the extent to which the auctioneer can control all of the information coming in and going out in the form of chant. If the auctioneer is so focused on the musical processes involved in crafting the bid-call that he cannot attend to the social dynamics of the sale, he may lose an interested buyer, misunderstand the visual and physical cues a bidder is giving, fail to appropriately engage buyers with different bidding styles, or miss an incoming bid from a ringman. Spanky Assiter explains why the improvised chant must be “automatic” to a certain extent in light of the many concerns to which the auctioneer must attend during the act of performance:

[Auctioneers] have chanted so much and practiced so much that they don’t think about their chant. They don’t have any clue. Because my mind’s thinking of other things: what can I say to this buyer to have him bid again? You’re thinking about where the bid is. You’re thinking about maybe the next car, maybe this car, maybe the reserve on the horse.

89 Seeck, interview. In this quote, I have changed the name of the auctioneer to which Seeck refers to respect and protect the auctioneers involved.
Maybe the owner’s over here and you’re thinking about looking at him to make sure that you’ve done everything in your power—at least he thinks you’ve done everything in your power—to get him the most money. Maybe you’re thinking about, at Keeneland we have guys in the back that you can’t see, so they’re bidding over a microphone, so you’re thinking about, have I made the announcement clear where my bid is, and who has the bid so you don’t sell out and you have two claiming the same bid. Or, you’re thinking about, am I on the right increment to get to the reserve price for example. For example, at the horse auction, at $100,000—that’s the reserve—I can’t sell it for $100,000. It has to be through $100,000, so I can sell it at $101,000. So, if that’s the case, then I, as the auctioneer, bidding for the seller, can’t be on the odd numbers. I have to be on the even numbers. Because I can’t be the $99,000, because that means that my bidder can be $100,000, and if he bids a hundred, well now I’m in a trap because I can’t sell it to him for a hundred, but I can’t bid a hundred and one because it’s over the reserve. So I’m thinking about all these things. I don’t have time to think about what filler word I’m using.  

Assiter’s description of the sales situation provides an example of the performative, social, financial, professional, motivational, and inter-personal elements at play in just one sale. Not only must the auctioneer possess the skill to perform the chant without a great deal of focus on the chant itself, but he must also be able to integrate the incoming data described above into that chant. In short, the highest possible price for an item can be reached only when the act of

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90 Spanky Assiter, interview. When Assiter refers to bidders “in the back” he is referring to the special practice at the Keeneland race horse auctions wherein bidders can place bids in the ring (a theater-style venue inside the auction building) or outside and behind the indoor theater. Here, bidders can examine horses as they are led into the ring for sale and may remain outside and place bids with ringmen positioned at the outdoor ring. In this situation, the auctioneer will receive bids from outside via remote audio communication through a headset worn during the auction. Thus, the auctioneer at Keeneland must take bids he can see inside the venue as well as bids communicated over the headset, all the while keeping both audiences informed about where the current bid is.
bid-calling does not interfere with, but instead facilitates the most efficient, fair, and exciting transaction possible given the specific dynamics of that sale and the bidding audience (with all of the history, social dynamics, and interpersonal connections present in the group).

**Finding Flow in the Practice of Auctioneering**

The “effortless” mastery of a style marked by such speed and intensity is often experienced by auctioneers as a specific psychological state wherein he is unaware of the mechanical processes of the bid-call, but is instead attuned to a variety of other information. In this state, time is experienced differently than in daily life, and the auctioneer senses a connection to the behavioral patterns, social dynamics, and nonverbal communication from the audience and auction staff. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of the flow state addresses just this type of special performative experience and offers a particularly useful explanation of the ways in which the performing auctioneer is able to synthesize formulaic performance with improvisatory strategies contingent upon non-linguistic pressures and information.91

Auctioneers commonly use the term “rolling” to describe a specific state of bid-calling performance in which the auction chant is flowing easily and the auctioneer is in sync with the bidding audience. In this state, all elements of

chant performance and communication with the audience fit together with little effort on the part of the auctioneer. At World Wide College of Auctioneering, the term was used frequently, but defined only once (in the sessions in which I participated) by instructor Jack Hines, who described rolling as “taking the bids at a fast rate of speed.”92 The term seems to have further connotations for auctioneers beyond fast bidding, however. Based on the variety of contexts in which instructors invoked the term, rolling can be described as the ideal performance state: bids are coming in quickly, but not so fast that the auctioneer cannot process them, the sale is moving along at a good pace, and items are selling at strong prices.

One of the primary conditions of the roll is a lack of focus on the mechanics and performance of the bid-call. Every auctioneer I interviewed described a similar sort of automatic performance state that occurs when everything is running well during the performance. Auctioneer Jim Seeck states:

If you’ve been in it for twenty years, and you’ve been doing it, we’re now at a point where we don’t think about the chant. The chant is just something we do, okay. And we chant—how do I explain it? We’re up there doing other things besides chant, and our mouth is moving. I’m not thinking about my chant whatsoever. I’m not thinking about what the next number is. It just comes out. I’m thinking about, alright, where am I gonna go to in the next bid? Is Donna Hamlin done? Should I be looking at Carl Tarkington? Is Carl Tarkington gonna be the buyer, or am I thinking it’s gonna be somebody else? Hey, there’s somebody else. That’s what’s going through my mind, okay? I’m not thinking about the next number. It just automatically comes out. I think most auctioneers, the

more they do it, are the same way. They’re not thinking about what the next bid is. They’re just letting it flow; they’re letting it go.  

Seeck’s comments, echoed by auctioneers throughout my research, reveal that auctioneers who are rolling are able to produce a complex musical chant with almost no conscious effort. Seeck’s comment suggests that skill, acquired over time, enables this sort of embodied performance, suggesting that the ability to internalize the bid-call for use in automatic performance is directly related to the practice-based system of auctioneering. The auctioneer becomes so familiar with the construction and spontaneous performance of the bid-call that he is able to economize the psychological energy spent on its performance. Ingrid Monson identifies a similar experience with jazz musicians: “The better one knows the tune, the less conscious attention needs to be focused on the basics of the tune, and the more attention can be freed up for taking improvisational risks and aurally scanning other parts of the band for moments of improvisational opportunity.”  

Because the auctioneer, like the jazz musician, can “automate” some aspects of his musical recall and performance, his capacity for assessing his environment is increased, and these assessments provide the information necessary to make improvisational decisions about how to construct the next

93 Seeck, interview.

phrase, introduce a new idea, or otherwise vary the musical structures being performed in the chant.

To attain a state of rolling or to “get in the zone” (as many auctioneers also describe the experience), an auctioneer must experience a specific set of conditions. This ideal state is not immediate; neither is it constantly achieved by every auctioneer in every auction, but it is the goal that most auctioneers express a desire to achieve as consistently as possible. The ability to perform a complex task with little thought about the act of performance is described in Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow:

These exceptional moments are what I have called flow experiences. The metaphor of ‘flow’ is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as ‘being in the zone,’ religious mystics as being in ‘ecstasy,’ artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they reach flow, yet their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar.95

Csikszentmihalyi identifies conditions necessary to achieve a flow state, conditions comparable to the performing demands experienced by the auctioneer, suggesting that the concept of rolling is indeed a flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi describes the first condition: “Flow tends to occur when a person faces a clear set of goals that require appropriate responses.”96 During the performance of the bid-call, the immediate goal is always to increase the bid

95 Csikszentmihalyi, Finding Flow, 29.

96 Ibid.
from the current dollar amount to the next higher increment. If the auctioneer receives a new bid, he has received the desired response, which, in turn, generates a response from the auctioneer in the form of a new bid request. The goals, then, in a live auction are clear and specific.

Considering that the majority of auction types (excluding real estate auctions) conduct sales between ten seconds and three minutes per item, the auctioneer is able to receive feedback about the achievement of his goals in two immediate ways. First, the auctioneer receives constant feedback during the bid-call in the form of new bids from the audience. Advancing bids are registered as positive feedback while stalled bidding is registered as a challenge to overcome. Second, the auctioneer receives feedback at the conclusion of each sale, based on the extent to which each item sells near, at, or above the seller’s desired price.

The relationship between the demands and the constant feedback related to the task and the skill necessary to perform the task(s) at hand further qualify the flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi elaborates:

Flow tends to occur when a person’s skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable....If challenges are too high one gets frustrated, then worried, and eventually anxious. If challenges are too low relative to one’s skills one gets relaxed, then bored. If both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, one gets to feel apathetic. But when high challenges are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur.97

97 Ibid., 30.
Beginning auctioneers rarely achieve flow because their skill level is not yet developed enough to strike the “just about manageable” balance with the demands of the auction. Having not yet solidified the formulaic aspects of their chant and the ability to immediately and unconsciously employ number scales, the new auctioneer must exert disproportionate effort to string together numbers and filler words smoothly. Thus, the challenge is too high to produce a flow state.

To overcome the imbalance between challenge and skill level, the auctioneer develops an embodied chant practice wherein the mechanics of the bid-call are made nearly automatic through the sheer repetitive doing of the chant. While an auctioneer is still developing his chant style, number scales, and formulaic approach to the bid-call, he is often unable to control the chant and quickly becomes overwhelmed with the information he must process in such a short duration of time. Csikszentmihalyi notes, “It is not enough to know how to do it; one must do it, consistently, in the same way as athletes or musicians who must keep practicing what they know in theory.” The immediate, ongoing, and consistent need to draw upon a large number of tasks at one time requires practice (both in regard to applied rehearsal of technique and recurring applied performance in live auction settings) in order to embody the technical aspects of

98 Csikszentmihalyi, Flow, 21.
chant performance. Appealing to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of embodied practice, Ingrid Monson describes a similar process in music:

The activity of practicing—mastering scales, rhythms, harmony, patterns, repertory, and style by repeating passages over and over again—is simply part of what it is to be a musician. Once musicians have this musical knowledge “in their fingers” (and ears), they may no longer need to think consciously about the faculties they have drilled into their bodies through practicing. Thus mimesis and repetition—of live or recorded sources—lead to embodied knowledge and the freeing of the conscious mind for creative aesthetic discovery and expression.  

As the auctioneer acquires increased facility with the embodied practice of bid-calling, expanding and honing a formulaic style, the balance between challenge and skill becomes more even. However, the nature of live auctions is such that a high level of skill is required at every moment of the auction in order to maintain the expressive momentum and musical structure of the chant.

The flow state for auctioneers is at once an automatic phenomenon, where complicated performance skills are employed with little conscious attention paid to them, and at the same time, a state of intense and all-consuming focus. Csikszentmihalyi notes the automatic nature of performance in the flow state when he comments, “…one of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience takes place: people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being

99 Monson, 24.
aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing.”

Auctioneer Spanky Assiter describes this effect in the act of bid-calling, and its effect after the sale:

I mean I’ve done things on the auction microphone, that people tell me later, say, well ‘why did you say this?’ and I say, ‘well, heck, I didn’t say that!’ ‘Why did you do this?’ ‘Well, I didn’t do that; you’re crazy.’ And they play the video back, or the tape back, and I’ve thought, ‘geez’, because you’re so mentally and physically consumed with the second that it’s happening. How do I describe it? … You know, in a lot of occupations, in school and stuff, you day dream. I don’t ever—I shouldn’t say ever—I don’t recall being able to daydream when I’m doing what I do, because I’m consumed with it.

Assiter describes the paradoxical condition of flow state auctioneering as one in which he experiences a sense of extreme focus on the total act of bid-calling, but not on the minute details of the bid-call itself. He retains no memory of his performance preceding the present moment; it is as if his mind “dumps” all unnecessary information as quickly as possible to allow for continued performance under the demanding auction conditions. At the same time, Assiter, like all auctioneers, is storing key information about the preceding sales events so that he knows to which bidders he must return, which bidders may yet enter the competition, for what price similar previous items have sold, what spending habits he has observed thus far at the auction, how long the current sale has lasted in relation to the average sales rate needed to keep pace for the

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100 Csikszentmihalyi, Flow, 53. In this text, “optimal experience” is synonymous with flow.

101 Spanky Assiter, interview.
day, etc. The bid-call itself is as embodied as walking: we are aware that we are walking, we continue to walk toward a destination, but we are unaware of each step and harbor no memory of each individual muscle movement used to move us from point of origin to final destination.

Csikszentmihalyi finds that extreme focus is a common condition in the flow state, the result of which is a flow-specific experience of time and consciousness: “The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes.”\(^{102}\) The flow state assists auctioneers with the physically and mentally demanding task of lengthy non-stop auctioneering by allowing them to shift into an altered sense of temporal duration. Without this “out-of-timeness” the auctioneer would be hard-pressed to manage the vocal, physical, and mental strain one would normally encounter during hours of continuous performance. It is common for auctioneers to engage in continuous bid-calling (with breaks of only a few seconds between lots) for long periods of time. In my fieldwork, it was common to see an auctioneer perform for two to four hours without breaking. At the longest continuous auction I attended during my research, Jim Seeck’s Carnival art glass auction, Seeck auctioned with no break for almost seven hours.\(^{103}\) In order to meet the physical and mental demands of continuous

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\(^{103}\) While some auctions I attended in my research lasted longer than Seeck’s Whittley sale, Seeck’s was the longest one employing a single auctioneer for the duration of the sale. It is common practice for lengthy sales to utilize two or
auctioneering, auctioneers must be able to divorce themselves from the conscious awareness of time as it unfolds.

Auctioneers describe such distortions of a sense of time during the auction in a variety of ways. Spanky Assiter explains:

> It’s hard to describe, as you know, because you’ve been in the zone yourself. I’m a big believer in the zone. I believe when you’re in athletics or music or anything performing-wise, auctioneering, motivational speeches, any type of performance, even if your performance is driving a fork-truck, that you can get in the zone. … And I know that when I finish an auction, I can auction for an hour and be completely drained. I’ve done it for years where I auction and I get in a car to go the airport and I don’t make it to airport before I’m asleep. The adrenaline, the excitement, the zone, if you would, completely takes over.  

Assiter suggests that physical and mental exhaustion are often deferred while he is in a flow state and are only registered after the auction concludes. Auctioneer Peter Gehres offers a different perspective on the altered sense of time experienced during the auction when he states:

> A four-hour auction that you’re rolling on, when you’re done with that, you’re ready to go again. An hour auction that’s been pulling teeth, that the crowd has been unengaged or too engaged, or whatever, and you feel like, I need to go on vacation. This is awful. This has been extremely bad, extremely boring…

more auctioneers who alternate on the auction block at intervals of one to two hours each, but Seeck chose to conduct the Whittley sale as the sole auctioneer (with ringmen to assist on the floor). Many auctioneers will auction continuously for three or more hours, though. As an example, the Mannheim automobile auctions in Denver, Colorado, require auctioneers to sell for three to four hours at a time two or more times each week.

104 Spanky Assiter, interview.

105 Gehres, interview.
Both Gehres and Assiter indicate that a successful auction—one in which they achieve a flow state—enables the auctioneer to become so focused in the act of performing, in the “now” of the auction, that they don’t register the flow of real time, nor the physical and mental demands of the act. Only after the sale does Assiter become aware of his physical condition or does Gehres realize the amount of time that has actually passed. Gehres’ comments also address the fact that this altered sense of time does not occur in every sale, but rather those sales in which he is rolling. His description of the protracted sense of time when he isn’t rolling echoes those encountered in Csikszentmihalyi’s research, when he describes auction scenarios with an imbalance between challenge and skill as frustrating and/or boring.

When discussing the flow-state or roll, auctioneers frequently describe a special type of consciousness in which they are able to selectively focus on certain aspects of the ongoing sale and de-select those aspects that are superfluous. The chant itself is often a superfluous component of the sale that the auctioneer effectively tunes out in order to train attention elsewhere. While the ability to select and control one’s attention during the performance of the bid-call is developed primarily through practice and repetition, auctioneer Nelson Aumann describes the way in which he was taught to direct his attention to non-chant elements of the auction concurrent with the performance of the bid-call during his training:
That’s one of the things they taught us at Fort Smith Auction School in that second week as we were doing our bid-calling. They had a person that would get in the back of the room and they’d write a word or two or three words on a sign or a board and then we would be auctioneering and then we’d stop and they’d ask us what that said on that. And Colonel Brown made that comment that that’s why you need to practice when you’re driving because your mind has to be on what you’re doing as far as going down the road besides that. And he said you’ll find out that that is the way you need to do it.106

Aumann’s instructors were approximating the flow state for their students by requiring them to relegate the performance of the bid-call to an automatic status such that they could control their attention enough to pick up on pieces of incoming information and retain them at the same time that they maintained a fluid, continuous chant. The skills developed by such exercises as Aumann’s example, along with the developed embodiment of the chant create the conditions for “rolling” in which the auctioneer may feel that he is operating on a different or elevated level of consciousness.

Though the flow state may appear to be an almost mystical experience—and indeed is qualified as such by some who have experienced it in other musical performance traditions—auctioneers disagree about the role that emotion and spiritual or mystical meaning have in relation to the flow state as they experience it. Auctioneer Peter Gehres comments:

> For me, when that situation gets going and it’s been going for a while, it really is somewhat of an out-of-body experience—not in a religious way, but just that everything is on cruise control. And I can think about other things. I can either appreciate it, you know, think about what’s going on

106 Aumann, interview.
and kind of analyze what’s going on. You tell auctioneer students that and they cannot, they simply cannot believe it. There is a time in bid-calling when you are not thinking about what you are saying.107

Gehres describes the flow state as other-worldly, but emotionally neutral. Most auctioneers interviewed in my research echoed Gehres’s idea that the condition of rolling was indeed a special one, separate from the mental conditions of everyday life, but were careful not to assign too much meaning to the experience. However, some auctioneers, such as Nelson Aumann, do associate a sort of performance high with the experience. Aumann explains: “I’m tired after the auction. And I didn’t do anything physical because I have staff that does that. But, if I’m selling three items a minute for two hours, the mental strain of that, after the auction, you’re really tired. But it’s the best feeling in the world. It’s the best feeling in the world.”108 Aumann describes the deferred physical strain common to other auctioneer’s experiences, but notes a particularly positive emotional state following the sale. Conversely, Darrah Williams’ assessment of the post-flow state is altogether practical, when she states, “I wouldn’t say I got a big auction high. You’re usually so damned tired afterwards that you just want to go to the bathroom, and you want to go get something to drink and eat.”109

107 Gehres, interview.

108 Aumann, interview.

109 Williams, interview.
Because the flow state gives the auctioneer a sense of automated chant production, the skill and complexity of the practice is often de-emphasized by the auctioneers themselves. When I began my fieldwork, I was surprised at how few auctioneers viewed their bid-calling as a musical practice. Though the rhythmic, melodic and improvisatory components of the bid-call seemed immediately apparent to me, auctioneers themselves unanimously articulated surprise that someone would find their work worthy of musical or aesthetic analysis. After many conversations with auctioneers, I came to believe that the degree to which the bid-call is an embodied act (characterized by the flow state of rolling) effectively hides the artistry required from the auctioneer himself.

Auctioneers make decisions about how to conduct a sale and act upon those decisions through the improvised musical practice of the bid-call. The relationship between formulaic performance and creativity is a real one, and the creative impulse does not exist in the minute production of structural units in the bid-call, nor is it manifest in an ever-changing musical surface. Rather, it is in the act of creatively synthesizing stored formulae that auctioneers blend economic and social data into a musical product that is both informed by the sales dynamics and actively shapes those dynamics. Like all improvised musical practices, the auctioneer must possess the ability to exist in two spaces simultaneously: the “now” space of the bid-call where the auction status is being broadcast and managed in real time, and the “future” space wherein the auctioneer simultaneously makes a mental projection forward in time, planning
the next few seconds of the bid-call and imagining what may happen in the bidding audience in the upcoming seconds. The rolling, flow-state into which the auctioneer enters provides the ideal conditions for shaping the musical and expressive components of the bid-call with utmost efficiency for positive sale outcomes.
Though all auctioneers operate within a shared general practice, no two auctioneers sound the same. Listeners familiar with the art of auctioneering can often identify an auctioneer within the first few seconds of his or her chant, not unlike the jazz aficionado able to identify a player within the first few notes of an improvised solo. In so doing, the listener is synthesizing diverse information about a performer’s style—the complex blend of techniques, approaches, and manner of presentation characterized by phrasing, articulation, rhythm, tempo, timbre, and expression. An auctioneer’s style represents a combination of practices, techniques, and situational determinants that, together, imbue each performer with a distinct sound. Style in auction chant is based both on the attributes common to specific types of sales and on those attributes that vary according to personal stylistic choices and practices.

**Speed as Style: The Unmistakable Sound of the Auctioneer**

The single stylistic quality shared by all auctioneers that distinguishes the practice from both normal speech and song is the speed of the auctioneer’s verbal delivery. Immediately recognizable, often confusing, and decidedly mesmerizing, the speed with which the auctioneer declaims the complex and ever-changing information regarding an ongoing sale remains one of the most
admired and least understood aspects of the practice to non-practitioners. Indeed, speed is a crucial element of bid-calling style, but one that can be demystified to a certain extent by consideration of the manner in which auctioneers acquire the skills necessary for speedy chant performance and the way in which speed is employed in the bid-call itself.

Koenraad Kuiper and Dennis Haggo offer a linguistic analysis of the perceived versus the actual speed of the auctioneer, arguing that auctioneers actually do not declaim at a much faster rate than normal speech, even if the listener perceives extreme speed. They find that auctioneers chant at an average rate of 5.3 syllables per second, which is close to the average rate of 6 syllables per second identified by Eric Lenneberg’s 1967 linguistic study *Biological Foundations of Language*. Speed, in the terms described by Kuiper and Haggo, must not be confused with tempo. The fastest parts of the bid-call are usually the filler words and phrases, so an auctioneer with a tempo (or pulse rate) slower than other auctioneers may appear to chant with greater speed depending on the rhythmic character of his filler words and phrases: the extent to which those phrases utilize more syllables to subdivide the pulse and the extent to which those filler words and phrases are present in the chant.

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Kuiper and Haggo’s assessment of auctioneering speed is confined to livestock auctioneers in North Canterbury, New Zealand, however, and may not represent the same average speed of American auctioneers, or of auctioneers in particular fields within the profession. Furthermore, Kuiper and Haggo’s calculation of syllables per second may not capture speed entirely accurately. The average speed of 5.3 syllables per second represents the total number of syllables in a sale divided by the total time of the sale (in the specific case cited here, 340 syllables over 64 seconds). Kuiper and Haggo allow for variations of speed within the overall course of the auction, citing (in a different example) that speeds of more than ten syllables per second are achieved and maintained for around two seconds at a time. As discussed in chapter 4, auctioneers manipulate speed by interjecting faster divisions of the pulse to create contrast and variety in the chant and to keep audiences engaged in the musical performance. However, it is unclear how often auctioneers in Kuiper and Haggo’s study are operating at high rates of speed compared to slower rates.

Indeed, most auction chant alternates between fast filler words and phrases and slower declamation of numbers. Averaging the two creates a misrepresentation of the practice, for it is the extreme speed of the filler words and the contrast between syllables-per-second speed for filler word and number declamation that characterizes auction chant style. While it may be true that an auctioneer’s average speed over a sale is somewhere between five and six syllables per second, this average number does not adequately represent the
extreme speed present in some portions of each sale. Additionally, Kuiper and Haggo suggest that their speed calculations omit long periods of pauses or interruption, but it is unclear how those moments are identified, and whether some moments of cessation or intentional slowing-down of the chant are included, thus resulting in a slightly skewed average number.

Clearly, more research is required to determine rate of speed across a broader spectrum of auctioneers based on nation, region, and sales type; additionally, some analytical attention must be paid to the higher-end of the speed spectrum and how often auctioneers operate at higher speeds (over eight or nine syllables per second) in order to quantify the relationship between normal speech and auctioneering speed. Kuiper and Haggo’s research does suggest, though, that auctioneers often chant at a rate of speed much closer to normal speech than listeners might suspect. While I question the manner in which they reach this conclusion, my research also suggests that large portions of most auction chant are not performed at fast speeds, but rather, the filler words and phrases create moments of speed throughout the chant.

If a great deal of auction chant is similar in speed to normal speech, why do listeners perceive such extreme speed? Simply put, the bid-call, “has features which make it sound faster than it really is.” According to Kuiper and Haggo, the perception of speed in auctioneering is affected by four major factors, each of

3 Ibid., 211.
which figures into any detailed description of this seemingly-mystical aspect of auctioneering style. First, the lack of pauses in auctioneering chant creates a heightened sense of speed.\(^4\) While the syllables per second may not be appreciably faster than normal speech, the marked absence of cessation influences the listener’s perception of that speed. Second, repetition in the auction chant contributes to a false sense of extreme speed.\(^5\) Kuiper and Haggo offer the following example to prove the point: “Speech consisting of one or two words repeated, as in the following example, sounds quicker than a sentence without repetition spoken at the same rate: I got twenty dollar twenty bid twenty bid twenty bid twenty got twenty bid forty.”\(^6\) Though Kuiper and Haggo do not extend the argument beyond this point, repetition is one of the most significant ways that auction chant separates itself from normal speech. The amount of repetition in auction chant is one of the hallmarks of stylization in the practice, removing it from normal communication and treating the message—predominantly organized in a syntactically correct, albeit protracted manner—with a stylistic manipulation that renders the message blurry in its perceived speed.

Repetition also contributes to Kuiper and Haggo’s third assessment of perceived speed in auction chant. Here, the authors argue that the sheer

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid., 212.
unfamiliarity of the chant affects listener perception.⁷ Though the authors do not specifically indicate that repetition is part of this unfamiliarity, it seems clear that the odd syntactical structures created by so much repetition contribute in part to the incomprehensibility of the chant. Distortion of filler words is the primary stylistic attribute that renders auction chant unintelligible to most listeners, and, though Kuiper and Haggo do not point specifically to distortion in their analysis, the analogy they provide applies quite well, stating, “foreign languages usually appear to be spoken quickly, while extremely quick passages in one’s own language will pass unnoticed in a conversation which one is attending to closely and understanding with ease.”⁸ Distortion makes the language of the chant “foreign” to its listeners, thus resulting in a perception of disproportionate speed.

Lastly, Kuiper and Haggo explain that, “apparent speed also depends heavily on how long a particular rate is maintained.”⁹ Fluidity and continuity in the chant are hallmarks of style across all types of auctions, regions, and personal styles. At World Wide College of Auctioneering, one of the primary skills developed with students was the ability to establish and maintain a continuous chant. As instructor Jim Seeck stated during a bid-call drill section, “the chant

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 212. The concept of distortion referred to here is discussed in chapter 2 and defined as the stylistic obscuring of the clear communicative function of filler words through speed, contraction, and inflection.

⁹ Ibid.
never stops.”\textsuperscript{10} The unceasing nature of the bid-call is both a key component of auction chant style and a major contributing factor to the chant’s perceived speed. As discussed in chapter 5, pauses can be effective tools for controlling and influencing audience behavior, but the effectiveness of this tool is based on the fact that auction chant seemingly continues without breaks, thus rendering any pauses surprising.

When auctioneer Darrell Cannon states that “rhythm is speed,” he suggests that—in addition to Kuiper and Haggo’s four justifications for perception of speed—the musicality of the auction chant itself is a contributing factor to listener perception.\textsuperscript{11} In particular, the establishment of consistent (or relatively consistent) meter in the auction chant removes the bid-call from normal speech (as discussed in chapter 4), and creates an organizational framework within which the auctioneer can fit fast-sounding phrase repetitions and distorted filler words in a continuous progression of unceasing chant. Amy Assiter, citing the teachings of her auctioneering mentor Ralph Wade, further

\textsuperscript{10} Jim Seeck, World Wide College of Auctioneering instruction, field notes by Nicole Malley, June 14, 2010.

\textsuperscript{11} Darrell Cannon, World Wide College of Auctioneering instruction, field notes by Nicole Malley, June 15, 2010. Here, Cannon uses the term “rhythm” as a synonym for pulse or meter, consistent with the use of the term within the auction profession (and as discussed in chapter 4).
confirms the correlation between music and speed when she states, “hum plus rhythm equals speed.”

While speed may be the single most identifiable style characteristic of the performing auctioneer, it is but one of a multitude of individual style traits present in the practice of bid-calling. Granted, all skilled auctioneers are fast, but beyond speed, other components of the auction chant such as sales type and personal style characterize the act of auction performance. While chapter 2 examined the general mechanics and practices of the auctioneer, questions of style require examination of the flexibility and variety with which those individual components of the bid-call are employed in the performance of the bid-call.

**Elements of Style: Region Versus Sales Type**

An auctioneer’s style develops over time and may change throughout a career. Regardless, each auction chant displays specific stylistic components that can be compared between subgroups within the auction profession. The distinct components of auction chant style can be considered individually, but it is the sum total of these separate characteristics that creates the distinctive voice of each auctioneer. My original hypothesis about auction style—that broad stylistic types or categories existed in auctioneering determined by region—proved to be altogether incorrect. Having so long equated tobacco auctioneering with the

southern United States, I assumed that the southern United States would have its own bid-calling style. Likewise, when I considered the variety of dialects and speech patterns between regions of the country, I assumed that auctioneering (so closely tied to speech in many ways) would exhibit similar regional stylistic variety. This hypothesis was quickly refuted upon entering World Wide College of Auctioneering. World Wide College enrolls students from around the country and around the world. Students in the summer 2010 class came from Iowa, California, Oklahoma, Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Texas, Canada, and Germany, to name but a few of the many locations represented. Likewise, World Wide instructors reside in locations around the country. Were auctioneering to be defined stylistically by geography, it would follow that aspiring auctioneers would study in their preferred region with auctioneers from that area. However, World Wide’s student population disproves this assumption. Rather, the school’s students and instructors reflect an overarching national auctioneering style.

World Wide College instruction, while disproving my initial hypothesis regarding regional styles, did confirm that style can be influenced by a variety of factors, the most significant being sales type, the material(s) being sold at the auction. While the bid-calling for each sales type observes the same general outline, almost every aspect of that outline varies slightly based on the specific type of sale.
Sales type has the most influence on rate of sale. While a real estate auction may last over an hour and sell only one lot, a tobacco auctioneer may sell over three hundred lots in an hour.\textsuperscript{13} In his historical study of tobacco auctioneering, Joseph Robert reports, “Stories were told of sales as high as 700 baskets per hour, but private rules and public laws curbed such excessive speeds. In most places by the 1930s the average had settled down to 360 sales per hour.”\textsuperscript{14}

While most auctioneers perform their bid-call with impressive speed regardless of the length of each individual sale, an auctioneer must move through the discourse structure at a very different pace depending on the length of a sale. Correspondingly, the auctioneer must employ quite different strategies to avoid monotony in an hour-long sale than he would in a ten-second sale. It follows, then, that aspects of rhythm, pitch, inflection, and phrasing are influenced by the length of sale and the number of sales an auctioneer must complete in the allotted time frame of the auction.

Between the extremes of real estate and tobacco auctioneering fall the remaining sales types listed above. Personal property sales, such as weekly

\textsuperscript{13} In an undated radio commercial for the Lucky Strike Cigarette Company, famed tobacco auctioneer Lee “Speed” Riggs is credited with winning the world record for auctioneering speed, with 370 lots sold in forty-two minutes, or a rate of almost nine lots per minute.

auction barn sales or estate sales featuring hundreds of individual items, will fall on the faster end of the spectrum, normally selling a lot every forty-five to ninety seconds. Likewise, collectibles and antiques sales or automobile sales with hundreds of lots for sale in the same auction will normally sell at a rate of sixty to ninety lots per hour. Livestock auctions tend to run at a slower rate of sale, with frequent interjections from the auctioneer to re-sell the lot, encouraging bidders to appreciate the quality and value of the animal on the auction block. Auction speed can also vary by venue. The racehorse auctions at Keeneland, though technically livestock sales, operate at a faster pace than most professional livestock auctions, with an average sales rate of forty-five to seventy sales an hour.

Sales type is one of the primary determining factors in regard to words-per-minute speed, intelligibility, metric stability, and melodic variety. These aspects of the bid-call vary by sales type because different types of sales necessitate and/or facilitate different approaches to the bid-call and its relationship to the makeup of the audience. Bidding audiences generally fall into one of two categories: public audiences, or professional dealers and buyers. A weekly auction barn sale will cater to a “general” or public audience while a closed automobile dealer sale will cater to a select group of professional buyers.

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15 “Re-selling” is used here in the profession-specific sense, meaning that the auctioneer stops the chant to elaborate upon the value of the item up for sale, effectively inserting an additional sales pitch in the middle of the chant.
car dealership owners, and managers. Likewise, an estate sale will attract a wide variety of members of the public as opposed to a tobacco auction that is open only to approved professional buyers designated by the cigarette companies (or other tobacco businesses). A “general” audience may or may not have experience with auctions, while a professional buyer audience will come with extensive auction experience.

**High-Context Versus Low-Context Auction Types:**

**Effects on Bid-Calling Style**

Edward T. Hall’s anthropological examination of improvised cultural practices provides a particularly useful model for understanding the ways in which auction sales types can determine many of the musical and performative aspects of the bid-call and the sales process. Hall identifies that improvised practices occur along a spectrum from high to low context, stating:

> A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already known to the recipient, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message or the music. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite: the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. People who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than lawyers drafting a contract, a mathematician programming a computer, politicians formulating legislation, or administrators writing regulations (all LC).  

The musical, improvised practice of bid-calling is, by its very nature, higher context than many forms of communication because it relies on a bidding

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audience familiar with the practice and condenses many ideas, statements, and information into the musical fabric of the auction chant. Indeed, Hall states, “we must never forget that improvisation is high context, whereas composition is low context. With any HC system, the link to the audience is more binding (since there is more shared information) than with the slower, lower context forms.”17

Though all forms of auctioneering exist on the high context end of Hall’s spectrum, auction types differ based on the degree to which they exhibit high- or low-context characteristics. Comparatively, an auction reserved for a professional bidding audience is higher-context than an auction presented for the general public. The auctioneer at a tobacco sale or a dealer car auction works with a consistent, known group of buyers who are familiar with the process, structure, and details of the sales scenario. These professional buyers do not need frequent status updates, nor do they need information clarified or repeated (with rare exceptions for unusual circumstances). Conversely, an auctioneer working with a general audience cannot assume that bidders are familiar with the auction process, and thus, must structure the bid-call (and the entire auction) in ways that keep the audience consistently updated and clear about the proceedings. Auctioneer Darrah Williams explains the difference between the two types of auctions when she states:

I think there are differences in different markets. You’re going to find a completely different chant with the people who are involved in the auto

17 Ibid., 231.
industry, the livestock industry, that sort of thing….The chant is really a verbal form of shorthand. So if somebody is selling livestock, for example—they’re selling one product, a commodity, to a very educated group of buyers. I mean, they’re not there to buy cups and saucers or a car or a piece of real estate. They’re buying one thing: cattle. Cattle, cattle, cattle. Time after time, after time.  

While speed is essential to any successful auction, many aspects of the sales process can be truncated and abbreviated in professional buyer auctions that cannot be in general audience auctions, and these “short-handed” sales techniques result in significant stylistic differences between bid-calling at the two types of sales. For the general audience, each aspect of the discourse structure must be clearly delineated. Much like the discourse structure described by Kuiper, Ralph Cassady outlines the overall structure and progression of an auction presented for a general buying audience:

1) The starting price the auctioneer wants to get, whether or not he suggests it

2) The actual bids received, which the auctioneer repeats for the information of competing bidders

3) The bid he is attempting to obtain, which may be expressed either as
   a) The amount of the advance or as
   b) The total amount sought

4) Filler words and phrases, many of which are useful tactical devices, even though they are meaningless in the sense of direct communication

5) The announcement of the sale to the high bidder

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18 Williams, interview.

Here, Cassady isolates a crucial difference between the sales types, suggesting that professional buyers are so familiar with the sales process that they do not need to be directed as deliberately through the auction as a general audience. Here, Cassady echoes the concept of Hall’s HC-LC spectrum in regard to auction style. Furthermore, Cassady comments, “In auctioning goods to dealers and other professional buyers who are constantly in the market, it is not important to make the chant intelligible. The esoteric chant sounds like gibberish to the uninitiated, even though it may be as fascinating to the ear as a child’s nursery rhyme.”

Acknowledgment of the stylistic differences between professional high-context auctions and other lower-context auction types is evident in the existence of bid-calling competitions in the United States. Although both the National Auctioneers Association and state auctioneers’ associations hold annual bid-calling competitions that include auctioneers from all fields of the profession, special state, regional, national and international competitions exist for auctioneers within the fields of automobile and livestock auctioneering, and previously existed for tobacco auctioneering. Practitioners within the general

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20 Ibid., 121.

21 Due to the virtual demise of the tobacco auctioneering, the World Tobacco Championship is no longer in existence. The last World Tobacco Auctioneering Championship was held in 1987.
profession of auctioneering recognize that these three types of auctions share stylistic qualities unique to their specialized fields.

Auctioneers selling to a professional audience in a high context scenario are thus able to truncate many aspects of the sales process to an extent which renders the bid-call incomprehensible to buyers untrained in the specialized market operations, community, and buying culture. The best example of this extreme truncation occurs in tobacco auctioneering. In this type of sale, only professional buyers appointed by the cigarette companies are able to bid and buy. The buyers will often travel from warehouse to warehouse on the circuit together during the buying season, and thus, develop a clear sense of market prices and how individual company representatives are likely to bid. Because the product for sale is the same from lot to lot, varying only in small gradations of quality, sales prices will remain within a limited range.

The tobacco buyers walk with the auctioneer from pile to pile of tobacco, laid out on the warehouse floor. Buyers will inspect each lot and bid quickly as

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22 The practice of tobacco auctioneering has been on a fast decline since the 1990s. The Tobacco Farm Life Museum in Kenley, North Carolina, reports that in 1997, the state had more than one hundred and thirty tobacco warehouses in operation, but by 2003, the number had dwindled to only fourteen. “The Tobacco Warehouse,” http://www.tobaccofarmlife museum.org/museum-exhibits/the-tobacco-warehouse, accessed July 13, 2010. Other states report similar numbers. Since 2000, cigarette companies have been purchasing an increasing percentage of their tobacco directly from farmers on contract, causing a sharp decline in the amount of tobacco offered on the auction circuit and the number of industry bidders buying through this method.
the group moves down the aisle. Because the sale price for each lot of tobacco may vary by only a few cents or a few dollars per pound, the auctioneer is not tasked with moving through a wide range of numbers to arrive at the final sales price. Little competition exists between buyers who are all bidding within a limited price range for the same product over and over. Only one buyer from each company is present at the auction, so the bidding audience is small, and there is little disagreement about the value and price of the product being sold. Each buyer will have ample opportunity to buy a similar product at the next lot, so filler words, dramatic pauses and striking rhythmic and melodic contrast are not necessary to incite bidding. Rather, the auctioneer and the buyers are able to determine sales prices very quickly within that limited price range, move on to the next lot, and complete sales with extreme efficiency and speed.

With a trained buying audience, a limited price range, and a goal of extreme efficiency, the tobacco auctioneer employs a style of filler word and number distortion unique to the industry. Filler words themselves are rare, as the tobacco auctioneer tends to chant only the numbers, but the numbers are distorted to such an extent that the chant is, effectively, expressed in a special code known only to those sellers and buyers associated with the industry. Ralph Cassady, the only scholar to treat the issue of tobacco auctioneering “code,” identifies the following common distortions in the chant:

one = mun or mun-a
two = doo, doodle oodle oo
three = ree, ree-nee
quarter = wah, wah-ta
half cent = hah, hah-ta
three quarters of a cent = ree, ree-nee

Because a tobacco auction represents an extreme high-context situation, words are reduced to single-syllable musical sounds, conveying the least amount of material necessary to convey information to an audience trained to understand the seemingly incomprehensible utterances. In essence, the extreme distortions become codes, recognizable to the informed buying audience. These distortions allow the auctioneer to chant fast and smoothly, eliminating as many manipulations of the tongue as possible to get through the chant as quickly as possible. Thus, tobacco auctioneering exhibits the most minimal and economical use of musical materials, presented to an audience trained to interpret the reductions to code through years of experience and shared knowledge.

Minimalist reduction in tobacco auctioneering occurs in the performance of a high level of distortion. One example of the specialized distortion used in tobacco auctioneering is presented in Example 6.1, a transcription of a tobacco chant by L.A. “Speed” Riggs, as recorded for a national radio advertising campaign for Lucky Strike:

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23 Cassady, 124. Cassady’s list of tobacco auction distortions is not comprehensive and likely represents those auctioneers with whom the author was familiar, or a particular regional style within the broader profession of tobacco auctioneering. No comprehensive study has yet been attempted on the unique distortion of the tobacco auctioneer, and with the imminent demise of tobacco auctioneering, available ethnographic subjects are decreasing quickly.
Example 6.1. L. A. “Speed” Riggs, Tobacco Auction Chant

This chant, completed in seven seconds from start to finish (at a tempo of 268 beats per minute), is typical of the length for an individual tobacco sale. The sale opens at thirty dollars and ends at the winning bid of thirty-five dollars. Riggs only provides the “handle,” or the full number at the beginning of the sale (“thirty dollars”). After three iterations of “fi dollah” (shorthand for “thirty-five dollars”), no new bids are placed, and Riggs closes the sale with “Sold Amer(i)can,” indicating that the buyer from the American Tobacco Company has
placed the winning bid. The full sales price is not reiterated at the end of the sale, but rather, the next sale commences immediately. Many of the details of Kuiper’s discourse structure are absent, but they are not necessary when the bidding audience is trained to react to an abbreviated process. Filler words are essentially nonexistent unless we count “dollar” as a filler word, creating a streamlined chant free of extraneous information. Absent of filler words, the rhythm undergoes little variation and consists primarily of strings of eighth notes with some sixteenth note divisions on the off-beats. A simple, yet effective closing melodic gesture makes the end of the sale quick and definitive, creating a full cadence point before the start of the new sale. The auctioneer needs not state, “This lot of tobacco has been sold to the buyer from the American Tobacco Company for thirty-five dollars a pound; now we will start the bidding on the next lot of tobacco.” Rather, the patterned melodic gesture conveys all of this information in its most abbreviated form while initiating the next round of bidding.

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24 Because the same companies are represented at all tobacco auctions, auctioneers also short-hand the names of the companies. During the 1960s through 1980s, when tobacco auctioneering flourished, the following companies were commonly present at most tobacco auctions: American Tobacco Company, Dibrell Brothers, P. Lorillard, Virginia Tobacco, Thorpe-Greenville Export Tobacco, and R. J. Reynolds. In auctioneer slang during the bid-call, Virginia Tobacco is often referred to as “Ginny-Bell,” Thorpe-Greenville as “TG,” and R. J. Reynolds as “run John, run” or “walk a mile.” Uncredited radio broadcast from the First National Tobacco Auctioneer’s Competition, 1981, National Auctioneers Association Archives.
A tobacco auctioneer’s chant is further distinguished by specific melodic gestures. Riggs opens the majority of his sales with a whole-step ascent to a major third above the hum pitch, but his most characteristic melodic gesture is the descending major triad that closes every sale, including the sale transcribed here. In Example 6.1, the majority of the chant remains on the hum pitch of G, with distinct opening and closing melodic gestures providing musical structure. Many tobacco auctioneers employ a similar structure, conducting the sale entirely on the hum pitch or on the hum pitch with only momentary leaps to the major third. In these cases, the melodic variety appears as opening and closing phrases.

Tobacco sales represent the most extreme degree of the high-context sales condition in regard to speed, stylization, distortion, and patterned melodic gesture. With such truncated and minimal musical devices, why is the chant used at all in such a specialized context? The steady tempo brings the group of buyers and auctioneer into the same musical space, moving the day’s sales along at a consistent rate. Buyers are trained not only to understand the lingo of the tobacco auctioneer, but are trained by the auctioneer to expect a relatively consistent rate of sale, aware that they need to place their bids quickly or the sale will end. The musical style of tobacco auctioneering caters to the special high-context, fast-paced nature of the sale, facilitating smooth, predictable buying and selling behaviors over the course of the day’s sale.
Dealer automobile auctions, another example of an auction environment restricted to professional buyers at the high end of Hall’s context spectrum (though not as high context as tobacco auctioneering), exhibit some of the abbreviated stylistic elements of the tobacco auction, but include more features of the complete discourse structure. The dealer car auction can be identified by some of its own characteristic rhythmic and melodic components. Like the tobacco auction, dealer car auctions are open only to registered professional buyers affiliated with car dealerships. Large car auctions, like Mannheim Denver, present weekly auctions in their facilities where cars are moved through a sort of long garage with lanes running in and out of the building so that auction staff can move cars through the venue quickly. Each of the multiple auctioneers working a sale is assigned to a specific lane, but the buyers are free to move between lanes to dip in and out of different sales and to inspect cars as they enter the venue. The auctioneer remains in a fixed position in an elevated booth above the buyers, while a ringman dedicated to each lane moves throughout the bidding crowd to find and encourage interested bidders. Because the bidding audience for a dealer car auction is mobile and ever-changing, the ringman bears a special responsibility for keeping buyers engaged in the current sale, providing a level of entertainment and social interaction on the floor, finding bids in a confusing and seemingly chaotic environment, and conveying bidding information to the auctioneer clearly and effectively. In addition to the bidders at the sales venue, the auctioneer receives bids from the company’s online live
auction interface. The clerk, seated directly next to the auctioneer enters each new bid as it is received from the floor and the updated bid appears on a computer screen in front of the auctioneer and clerk. Newly received internet bids appear on the computer screen automatically and are identified as online bids so that the auctioneer can inform the on-site bidders and ringman when the high bid is in the hands of an online bidder.

All dealer auctions rest on the higher end of Hall’s context spectrum due to the shared knowledge of the professional bidding audience, but dealer car auctions are slightly lower-context than tobacco. The bidders are familiar with the process and structure of the sale such that the auctioneer can shorten some aspects, but the difference between lots requires the communication of specific information during each sale. Unlike the tobacco auction, the automobile auctioneer must differentiate each lot from the others to interest bidders; in some cases, the auctioneer must amend or change incorrect information in the sales catalog. Additionally, the auctioneer must include occasional status updates to clarify the location of the high bid, particularly in bidding situations where three or more on-site bidders are actively placing bids, or in situations where on-site bidders are competing with online bidders. The addition of the ringman in dealer car auctions also requires more explicit communication of information.

An auctioneer selling to a general public audience faces very different demands from the auctioneer working with a professional audience, and these demands directly affect the style of his bid-call. Here, the auctioneer does not
benefit from alienating or confusing his audience with unintelligible or overly coded chant. The diverse nature of the public auction necessitates a level of coherence, speed, and structure that keeps the bidding audience engaged, informed, and able to participate. Distortion of filler words is greatly reduced in these lower-context auctions as extreme clarity is required, based on the diverse and possibly unfamiliar bidding audience.

Personal property auctions, also commonly referred to as “auction house” or “auction barn” sales, are open to the public and offer a wide range of items over the course of two to four or more hours. Personal property sales are often conducted in a venue operated by the auctioneer and may occur once a week, bi-weekly, or at some other recurring interval. Some personal property auctioneers do not have a fixed sales venue but will rent out a banquet hall, conference room, or other space for occasional sales or may conduct sales on-sight when an estate is selling off numerous items from one home or owner. One weekly personal property sale might include electronics, furniture, art, jewelry, clothing, house wares, tools, books, and more.

Sales rates in personal property auctions are generally quite fast in order to work through the hundreds of lots up for auction at a given sale, but auctioneers in these types of sales must be cognizant of the audience’s capacity to understand and react to the auctioneer. While audiences often attend personal property sales for their entertainment value and thus expect a certain level of bid-calling speed and excitement from the auctioneer, the audience is not a
professional one, and as such, needs more guidance from the auctioneer to navigate through the sales process. In Hall’s spectrum, personal property sales exist at the low-context end of the scale in comparison to all other types of auctions. Hall explains, “in low context communications the goal is to make the message as complete and as explicit as possible.”

Because of the need for explication in low-context general audience auctions, personal property sales almost always include every component of Kuiper’s discourse model in order to guide bidders through the process clearly and effectively.

Personal property sales tend to blend speech and sung chant more than professional sales types. Personal property auctioneers often slip out of the hum to explain aspects of the sale or may conduct the sale in a speaking voice rather than a chanted hum. The “virtuoso” bid-caller (discussed below) is rarely involved in personal property sales. Rhythmic and metric contrast is less prevalent in auction house settings, and personal property auctioneers are more likely to establish and maintain a referential meter with very little variation. In addition, filler phrases usually consist of only one or two words rather than lengthy, complex phrases that might disorient the bidding audience. Personal property sales must be accessible to all interested buyers, and because of this, the auctioneer is likely to interject less musical contrast and variation to the

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25 Hall, 230.
established style of the chant in order to create a sense of familiarity for the bidders.

Between the extremes of professional and general audience auctions, real estate auctioneering exhibits some specific stylistic characteristics based on the special demands of the sale type. The duration of one real estate lot sale may last only two to three minutes, but often the sale of a piece of land, a building, or a home can last thirty minutes to an hour for one lot, making real estate sales far longer than all other auction types. Filling in the space of a thirty-minute auction, where the auctioneer might remain on one number for more than five minutes at a time, requires a different set of techniques from other auction types, affecting style in particular ways.

Real estate auctioneers employ a greater variety of filler words and employ those words more frequently than in other sales types. While filler words only impede the efficiency of professional sales or personal property sales that need to move through hundreds of lots in only a few hours, filler words are the saving grace for the real estate auctioneer, who must maintain interest in the sale over a long period of time through a varied and engaging chant. Addressing the special problems faced by auctioneers who must remain on the same number for a considerable length of time, Assiter poses a musical analogy:

If I go to play my trumpet, and I blow the same note for as long as I can hold it. I take a breath and I blow the same note again as long as I can hold it, and I do that for three or four or five minutes, that’s music because
there’s a sound coming out of a trumpet, but I’ve lost my audience. They’re not going to stay and listen.26

Though the auctioneer may be stuck on one number, he must not get stuck musically in a repetitive and invariant chant. If he does so, he loses his audience’s interest because the chant has been divested of one of its primary effective characteristics: variation and surprise. Stylized variation and contrast in the form of filler words and phrases are needed to infuse the chant with musical interest enough to break up the monotony of the same number. The use of a wide variety of filler words in real estate auctions also obscures the repetition of one number, casting that number in a slightly different rhythmic framework each time it is repeated. The following example of the chant text from a hunting preserve land auction by auctioneer Van Adkisson shows the variety of filler words in one brief section of a real estate sale:

I’m bid four thousand, now half.
I’m bid four thousand dollar down here now,
Four thousand dollar down here now.
What do you say sir at four thousand now half?
I’m bid quarter now half;
I’ve got four thousand and a quarter now
Four thousand fifty.
Would you give forty fifty?
Would you give forty fifty?
Forty fifty, forty fifty?
Seventy-five now, seventy-five now, seventy five?
Bruce, you’re out again.
Forty seventy-five now, seventy-five now,
Forty seventy-five now, forty seventy-five now,
Forty seventy-five.

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26 Spanky Assiter, interview.
Now one, now one, now forty-one, now forty-one,
Now would you give forty-one, now would you give forty-one?²⁷

In this brief excerpt (lasting only twenty-four seconds), Adkisson uses the filler words “I’m bid,” “dollar down here now,” “what do you say sir,” “at,” “now,” “I’ve got,” and “would you give.” In addition to the various filler words, Adkisson also finds different ways to state the same number (four thousand fifty = forty fifty, fifty=half, and both forty-one and forty seventy-five are abbreviated at times to one and seventy-five).

Example 6.1, Lee “Speed” Riggs’ tobacco chant, demonstrates the other end of the spectrum with no filler words at all, but the style of most auctioneers exists between the two extremes. Personal property auctioneers will often rely on one or two word fillers such as “now,” “and now,” “I’m bid,” and “I’m at,” avoiding lengthy filler phrases that slow down the sale. During a sale lasting forty-one seconds, art glass auctioneer Jim Seeck uses only the filler words “and,” “now,” and “give,” in comparison to the seven filler words or phrases used by Adkisson in a shorter sale.

The structure and pace of real estate auctions differs significantly from other auction types because the bidding pace in real estate auctions is extremely varied. Bidding will often start with a number of active bidders and stall at a certain dollar amount. In most other auction types, this would indicate that the

²⁷ Van Adkisson, North Creek Preserve land auction, Knoxville, Illinois, recorded field notes, July 31, 2010.
sale was nearing completion. However, it is not uncommon in a real estate auction to see no new bids for minutes at a time and then, suddenly, a flurry of new bidding. Because of this pace variation, many auctioneers will take a break in the middle of a real estate sale when the bidding stalls, stopping the chant and all bidding activity for ten to fifteen minutes. The practice of breaking in a real estate auctions seems to be a regional characteristic. Breaks are expected and common practice in most of the Midwestern states, but the practice is uncommon in the south and southwest.

Real estate auctioneers tend to sell at a slower tempo than auctioneers in professional and general, personal property settings. Assiter explains:

…..when the bidding slows down and you’re selling a piece of real estate, for example, and you’re at a million dollars asking a million-two, or a million-one, now the filler words becomes important because you can’t say ‘million-one, one, one, one, one, one, one, one, one, one, one, million-one, million-one, million-one.’ You’ve gotta have something else to say to make it pleasing to the ear. Now in saying that, on that real estate, you don’t have to go very fast. You could say, “I’m bid a million dollars; would you give a million-one, sir?” One million, one-hundred thousand is what I’m asking.’ So now you’re asking the guy a question and you’re doing it nice and slow and easy.28

While it might be easy to assume that the slow pace of a real estate auction is due to the high dollar value of the items being sold, this is not entirely the case. In contrast, the Keeneland yearling horse auction routinely sells individual horses for more than a million dollars in less than two minutes, while a $100,000 farm land sale may last forty-five minutes or more.

28 Spanky Assiter, interview.
The Auctioneer’s Voice: Individual Stylistic Variants Within Auction Types

While some broad stylistic characteristics are common to specific fields within the auction industry, each auctioneer makes the chant his or her own by crafting a personal style. An auctioneer’s voice, as articulated through his or her own style, exhibits individual rhythmic, metric, and melodic traits that synthesize learned patterns and stylistic qualities of mentor auctioneers with patterns and practices of the auctioneer’s own invention.

Auctioneers develop an individual style by adopting characteristic terms, idioms, and turns of phrase. These sayings and recurring verbal patterns offer the auctioneer the opportunity to incorporate personal communicative style into the bid-call. Idiomatic expressions and filler words differ between auctioneers, particularly in closing phrases. Perhaps more than any other place in the chant, the closing phrase can become a sort of catch phrase for an auctioneer. From Spanky Assiter’s, “I sold it, sold it, sold it!” to Denise Shearin’s “Oh no, I gotta go!,” the closing phrase acts as the auctioneer’s signature and creates a rhythmic formula for closing sales to which the auctioneer can return again and again. Often, the speed and rhythmic contour of a closing gesture create material that contrasts the established and recurring rhythmic patterns present in the chant. This technique provides a musical cue to the audience that the sale is either about to conclude or is concluding. For example, Assiter’s characteristic close (one of a few different closing gestures he uses) slows the pace of the chant down into a
drawn-out triplet, easing the listener out of the fast pace of the bid-call to a
musically satisfying and logical close.

The transition into the bid-call creates another opportunity for individual
style. In Kuiper’s discourse model, the description of the lot is always conveyed
in normal speech, but my research reveals that this is not the case for all
auctioneers. While some auctioneers wait until the first bid is placed to launch
into the sung chant of the bid-call, other auctioneers begin the hum at the
description of the lot and opening bid search, as seen in Example 6.2 taken from
a farm estate sale conducted by auctioneer Kurt Aumann. Aumann chants the
description of the lot as well as the opening bid search, establishing his hum
pitch before bidding begins. Aumann’s use of the chant for the lot description is
both an aspect of personal style and a functional strategy to keep the momentum
of the sale going. This particular sale featured hundreds of lots and spanned
over eight hours; thus, Aumann attempted to keep transition time between lots
to a minimum. Describing and starting sales in chant rather than in normal
speech allowed him to progress quickly while eliminating almost all dead time
resulting from musical cessation. Most auctioneers describe lots in normal
speech, but many, like Aumann, do not. My research suggests that the position
of the switch from speech to hum is unrelated to auction type or region, but
varies on an individual basis.
Rhythmic style varies between individual auctioneers, both as a function of sales type and personal style. As discussed in chapter 4, the internal rhythms of the auction chant are related primarily to the rhythmic character of the filler words. Because an auctioneer relies on a distinct set of preferred filler words, each auctioneer’s rhythmic style will vary accordingly. Denise Shearin discusses the manner in which she acquires new filler words in relation to her established rhythmic style:

When I practice sometimes, I mean, just have a filler word come out that was not intended, but it just kind of happened in that moment and it fit the rhythm and it fit what I was doing at the time….What I’ll do is take a few moments right there and just go through the filler word—just repeat
that filler word. And then, periodically during that practice session I’ll put some numbers in there and really try to develop the rhythm of that particular filler word so that the next time it comes out, it would be more conscious—as unconscious as bid-calling has to be sometimes. But it will be more conscious to me; it won’t be as much of a surprise to me.29

In this instance, Shearin discusses the focused practice she employs to solidify accidentally discovered filler words within her permanent collection; the acquisition of new filler words into an auctioneer’s personal style occurs when a filler word strikes her as particularly interesting in sound and fits into the overall rhythmic character of her established chant. Shearin uses the concept of rhythm in the sense of meter, suggesting that the newly discovered filler word fits into and provides rhythmic interest or “pop” in the musical line of the chant.

Each auctioneer will find that some filler words work better for him or her than others. During my instruction at World Wide College of Auctioneering, this became immediately obvious when I would attempt to use a filler word or phrase which sounded good in another auctioneer’s chant, only to find that the word or phrase didn’t sound right in my own chant. I was particularly attracted to Matt Lowery’s and Amy Assiter’s use of the filler phrase “dollar down here (now),” but was never able to comfortably weave the phrase into my own chant, finding this phrase problematic for two reasons. First, I experienced a great deal of difficulty mastering the distortion of the phrase (both auctioneers distorted the phrase to something close to “dotter dun dere dun”), and second, I struggled

29 Shearin, interview.
with ways to incorporate the rhythm of the phrase into my duple meter chant, seeming always to end up in a three-beat (“one dollar down”) + two-beat pattern (“here now”). By the end of the session, I found a few phrases that felt particularly comfortable in my chant including “how ’bout a bid now,” and “would ya give.” In my chant, the first phrase has the rhythmic pattern of a quarter, two eighths, and two quarter notes, while the second phrase has the rhythmic pattern of two eighths and a quarter note. Thus, these filler patterns became integral components of my overall rhythmic style. Accordingly, the specific rhythmic quality of any filler word or phrase, once integrated into an auctioneer’s arsenal of patterns, also becomes a hallmark of her style.

In my fieldwork interviews and auction school instruction, auctioneers repeatedly suggested that the balance between filler words and numbers is a crucial component of style. Though no definitive formula exists to quantify the ideal percentages, many auctioneers were unequivocal in their assessment that one of the major stylistic flaws possessed by some auctioneers was their overuse of filler words. While filler words, in all their speed and distortion, are perhaps the most iconic aspect of bid-calling, meaningless fillers, too many fillers, or overly lengthy fillers are generally considered bad taste in the auctioneering community. Paul Behr, on the first day of World Wide College instruction, warned against the inclusion of “junk,” or too many filler words in a chant.30

30 Paul Behr, World Wide College of Auctioneering class presentation, field notes recorded by Nicole Malley, June 12, 2010.
while auctioneer Peter Gehres refers to the same practice as “garbage.” Spanky Assiter describes the issue of filler word-number balance when he states, “If the filler word is distracting from that number or if it’s so long that you can’t find the number, then, in my opinion, and please understand this is all my opinion, then it becomes trash.” Auctioneer Darrell Cannon (and numerous other World Wide instructors) refer to overuse of filler words as “hot-dogging,” a term common in other fields of improvisational music such as jazz. In both auctioneering and jazz, the concept of “hot-dogging” refers to an emphasis on style over substance, an overuse of ornamentation at the expense of direct communication with the audience. Auctioneers must strike a fine balance, then in crafting a personal style that does not place stylization itself in the foreground.

In automobile and livestock auctioneering, a special rhythmic component unrelated to filler words is sometimes added to the bid-call. In both fields, it is common to see auctioneers use a prop to provide rhythmic punctuation during the auction chant: at livestock auctions this prop is a gavel and at automobile auctions it is usually a piece of plastic tubing or hose. Both props are struck against the tabletop (the auction block) intermittently during the bid-call. Paul C. Behr notes that the use of the plastic hose in automobile auctioneering is most

31 Gehres, interview.

32 Spanky Assiter, interview.

33 Cannon, interview.
commonly used by auctioneers from the northeastern region of the United States, but that the use of such props in both car and livestock auctions is intended to “keep rhythm” in the bid-call.34 “Rhythm,” in Behr’s characterization of the practice, reveals yet another example of the varied (and often nebulous) meanings of the term within the auction profession. The prop functions as a percussive interjection during the bid-call, but rather than underline a steady pulse or meter (as Behr’s comment might suggest), the strikes of the gavel or hose appear at irregular intervals as a second rhythmic instrumental voice against or in response to the rhythmic chant of the auctioneer.

Example 6.3 presents an instance of the percussive use of a gavel at a livestock auction conducted by Ray Sims in 1953. Here, the blows of the gavel are marked with “x” notation to differentiate them from the chant line. The gavel strikes are in tempo with the ongoing chant, filling in pauses in Sims’ bid-call. Sims’ use of the gavel follows a strict pattern, appearing at the end of phrases and, with one exception, always in units of four eighth notes preceding a quarter-note pickup into the next phrase. It is evident that the gavel strikes allow the auctioneer to maintain a steady flow of musical sound and time even when he pauses the chant. Additionally, the gavel strikes act as a rhythmic foil to the vocal chant, providing musical variety and timbral contrast.

34 Paul C. Behr, email message to Nicole Malley, July 19, 2011.
Example 6.3. Ray Sims, Angus Consignment Auction, 1963 (excerpt)

Al-right, here we go now, how many dollars on 'em?

Chon boys, al-right, here we go five hundred dollars on 'em. Right,

three hundred dollars here now four hundred dollars on 'em. Right,

three hundred dollars here now, four hundred dollars if you bought 'em,

able to buy 'em. Three hundred dollars here now, fifty now fifty dollar

able to buy 'em Three hundred dollars here now fifty dollars on 'em.

Now three hundred dollars here now fifty now fifty now, able to buy 'em

Three hundred dollars here now. What are we now? Fifty now fifty dollars,
Example 6.3 continued

able to buy 'em? Three hundred dollars, if you bought 'em now quarter now,

quarter now fifty? Now three and a quarter here now, fifty now,

fifty dollars here; do (ya) mean to buy three and a quarter, do you now? Fifty now,

fifty dollars here do (ya) mean to buy three and a quarter here now; what are we now,

fifty dollars on 'em? Now three and a quarter here now, fifty now,

fifty dollars here; do (ya) mean to buy three hundred fifty dollars if you bought 'em,

able to buy 'em? Three and a quarter here now, fifty dollars on 'em?

_____And three and a quarter now, fifty now, fifty five, fifty five dollars
Example 6.3 continued

Some auctioneers in the automobile and livestock professions use a less patterned and predictable approach to the percussive prop than Ray Sims, varying the number of blows and their placement within a phrase or meter. However, it is common to hear the gavel or hose strikes while the auctioneer takes a breath, suggesting that the practice is born to some degree from the practical needs of the auctioneer. The auctioneer has to breathe, but in a musical practice in which continuous, unceasing sound is valued, breathing poses a problem. With the percussive prop, the auctioneer can fulfill his need to recover breath without stopping the stream of sound.

At times, the percussive strikes and the bid-call are performed simultaneously, creating a layered rhythmic effect between the voice and the strike. In these instances, the gavel or hose is usually struck at points of emphasis including the introduction of a new number, the start of a phrase after a breath, or the repetition of a number. Too much percussive activity from these props would certainly distract attention from the bid-call and would prove to be counterproductive to the communicative function of the auction chant. However, the momentary coincident of chant and prop strike creates clear moments of punctuation and accentuation, and as such may be both a practical and an expressive tool for the auctioneer.

While it is difficult to characterize any one field of auctioneering as inherently more metrically stable than another, individual approaches to meter differ considerably between auctioneers, making meter more an aspect of
individual style than of sales type. The only sales type that seems to feature a standard approach to meter is tobacco auctioneering, in which meter is almost always consistent and duple; here, exceptions to the established meter are extremely rare or altogether nonexistent. In my fieldwork, I encountered a wide variety of “metric styles” associated with individual auctioneers. From Jim Seeck, who fits almost all bidding activity into an established and relatively stable duple meter, to Spanky Assiter, whose metric style is defined by a constant shift between two or three referential meters of equal importance, each auctioneer brings a unique metric style to his performance. No auctioneers in my research used a predominantly triple meter in their chant, though some—as part of their individual style—alternated with a triple meter more often than others. Within my fieldwork and archival recordings, Ray Sims relied on a triple meter more than any other auctioneer. As depicted in Figure 2 (above), Sims chant appears to be “in” neither duple nor triple meter but rather in both, alternating between the meters frequently and remaining in neither for particularly long periods of time.

Both the degree of metric stability and the uninterrupted flow of the auction chant appear to be contingent on sales type and personal style. Tobacco auctions avoid breaks in the bid-call and meter altogether, personal property auctions tend to break the chant more often than any other sales types, and real estate and livestock auctioneering disrupt the continuity of meter or stop the bid-call altogether (lapse into normal speech momentarily) to varying degrees
based on the individual style of the auctioneer. For example, at the Mannheim auto auction, each of the simultaneously performing auctioneers differed in their approach to chant fluidity. Some auctioneers broke the chant frequently to make comments to individual bidders or to highlight an aspect of the lot up for sale, while other auctioneers integrated every comment into the chant, stopping only between lots.

Pitch collection, pitch variety, and the pitch of the hum vary between auctioneers as an aspect of personal style. My data (as presented in Table 3.1) suggests that individual types of auctions cannot be characterized clearly by the size or nature of auctioneers’ pitch collections. It is possible to find small and large pitch collections from auctioneers in all fields of the profession. However, some broad characteristics can be identified. Tobacco and livestock auctioneers tend, on average, to have fewer pitches in their chants, often using only the hum pitch, the third above the hum (or the minor third below the hum) and the octave above the hum. A number of auctioneers outside these fields share similar collections though, so we cannot attribute small pitch collections only to these two fields. It is safe to say, however, that tobacco and livestock auctioneering tend to be more conservative in the use of different pitches as a general practice. Automobile, personal property, benefit (charity), and agricultural and professional equipment auctions appear to vary widely in regard to quality and quantity in pitch collections, suggesting that personal style is the main determinant in these fields.
Real estate auctioneers may employ greater pitch variety in their chant than other fields, according to auctioneer Denise Shearin. Shearin, primarily a real estate auctioneer, characterizes the style of real estate bid-calls as distinctly “sing-songy” in comparison to other styles of auctioneering. Asked to explain the term, Shearing states:

In speaking to people about me, I’ve had people tell me that they’ve heard different things: a gospel undertone, a jazz undertone, more of a hum behind the numbers. So for me, when I say sing-songy, that’s what it means. It’s getting more of that in there versus just hitting the numbers a little bit harder or hitting the filler words a little bit more hard.  

Shearin appears to attribute more emphasis on pitch, change in pitch level, and, perhaps, pitch variety to real estate auctions than to other types. When she describes styles that “hit the numbers,” she is referring to fast sales, those in which each lot sells in less than ninety seconds, and where speed and economy is most necessary. Because real estate auctioneers must manage lengthy sales that frequently remain on one number for long periods, variation of pitch becomes an important tool for the auctioneer, in addition to rhythmic and metric variation. Thus, it is not surprising that greater variety and contrast in all musical aspects of the bid-call would be present in real estate auctions due to the special structural demands placed on the practice.

Each of the stylistic aspects considered above combine to create an auctioneer’s personal chant style. While some parts of an auctioneer’s style are

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35 Shearin, interview.
determined by the type of sale being conducted, just as many stylistic attributes arise from personal practice.

**Auctioneering Today: Toward A National Style?**

A common practice style in auction chant has developed to a certain extent, due to the development and success of auction schools. Not only do auction schools attract students from around the country, and with a few exceptions, attempt to train students in all types of auctions, but also they have acted to mediate and synthesize regional styles into one, more unified national style. Auctioneer Peter Gehres suggests, too, that the trend toward fewer, larger auction schools, versus numerous small regional schools popular in the early decades of the twentieth century, has aided in a standardization of auction style not only between states and regions, but also among sales types. Auctioneer Nelson Aumann indicates that the standardization of style in auctioneering is a fairly recent development, not only attributable to auction schools, but also to and the proliferation of professional conferences and workshops for auctioneers from around the country, stating:

Fifteen years ago—twelve, fifteen years ago—the dialogue of auctioneers over parts of the United States was a lot different—particularly the East. They were, a lot of the auctioneers sounded like a machine gun. They didn’t use any filler words. That has changed a lot in the last fifteen years, and I think the biggest reason for that is because, if auctioneers all over the United States, or even, we have a lot of people in Canada and other countries that come in too, when you get together and you do auction seminars and bid-calling seminars and this kind of thing, you’re picking

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36 Gehres, interview.
up more similar ways to do chants. And I think the auction schools do that too, because a lot of the people—and particularly, I’m gonna use the Eastern seaboard because that was where they were so much different...their bid chant is a lot different. It’s more similar to the central United States, the Western United States or Southern. And a big part of that is because of the auction workshops and that type thing.37

Aumann and Gehres both believe that the profession of auctioneering has become less regionalized and more nationally organized in recent decades, as evidenced by the both the industry’s educational institutions (catering to students from around the country rather than specific region or auction type) and the professional development programs created for auctioneers from all regions of the country. Nonetheless, auctioneers develop and maintain individual style within the broader and increasingly common style of American auction chant.

**Competition Bid-Calling: How Auctioneers Assess Style**

Style is serious business in auctioneering. Not only can an auctioneer’s style mediate and facilitate specific auction conditions, but also it can afford an auctioneer respect and esteem within the auction community. Auctioneers are quick to describe the elements of good style when asked, and a formal system of peer critique of style exists in the form of bid-calling competitions, the outcome of which can make or transform an auctioneer’s career. Through these two sources—auctioneers’ descriptions of style and bid-calling competition judging

37 Aumann, interview.
guidelines—the various elements of style discussed in this chapter are articulated and evaluated by practitioners themselves, revealing a system of aesthetic values shared by the auctioneering community. Through these evaluative criteria, the auction community expresses its priorities and ideals in regard to bid-calling style in a system of stylistic description that utilizes insider language to synthesize many of the disparate characteristics of bid-calling style into complex, broadly-inclusive concepts of rhythm and sound quality.

When asked what appeals to them in a good bid-call, auctioneers tend to emphasize a few specific characteristics: rhythm, voice quality, appropriate and pleasing use of filler words, and clarity. Though seemingly broad, each concept encompasses an auction-specific set of stylistic qualities. As discussed previously, “rhythm” is a broad concept as employed by auctioneers in their descriptions and assessments of bid-calling. “Rhythm” can mean steady tempo, interesting internal rhythmic patterns, stable meter, or some combination of the three concepts to auctioneers, and although the term is employed with some flexibility between auctioneers, the combination of rhythmic characteristics contained in the auction-specific use of the word expresses a complex set of rhythmic concerns to which an auctioneer must attend in order to attain the more esoteric quality of “good rhythm.”

Equally broad is the concept of “voice quality” as articulated by auctioneers. When asked what constitutes a good bid-call, Paul Behr replied, “I think that getting your voice set, getting a voice quality that’s easy for people to
listen to, and easy on the ears, and also, from the user’s standpoint, that they can use that voice for a long time.”

Peter Gehres articulates the concept of voice quality slightly differently when he states, “So the next step is, is it pleasant to listen to? Because some chants, because of voice quality or obnoxious filler words or lack of filler words or too many, it just gets obnoxious to listen to.”

Neither auctioneer specifically describes what constitutes good voice quality in regard to timbre, pitch, range, etc., but both indicate that an auctioneer must make some aesthetic choices about voice range placement and timbre. Indeed, many auctioneers in my fieldwork could easily identify good and poor voice quality, and generally seemed to agree with each other about such assessments, but spoke only in the most general terms about this quality or set of qualities. When pressed to be more specific, auctioneers frequently commented that they were unaware of the “proper” musical terms for good voice quality, but that auctioneer’s “just know” it when they hear it. Based on instruction provided at World Wide and interviews with auctioneers, it seems clear that “good voice quality,” like “good rhythm,” encompasses a range of characteristics. These include hum pitch placement in the middle to lower-middle range of an auctioneer’s natural speaking voice, a lack of “forced,” “pushed,” or otherwise unnecessarily rough timbre, and clear, resonant sound. When auctioneers

38 Behr, interview.

39 Gehres, interview.
invoke “good voice quality,” it may mean one or more than one of these attributes, but, like “good rhythm,” the combination and balance of these components creates an overall aesthetic quality that auctioneers seem to be attuned to and understand as one general stylistic quality.

In addition to the broad concepts of rhythm and voice quality, auctioneers repeatedly indicated two other attributes of good bid-calling style: appropriate filler word use and clarity. Paul Behr comments, “I look at auctioneers and, you know, certainly, see what their filler words are and economy of words. So sometimes, I’ll see auctioneers that — the old saying — are trying to put a 50 pound pig in a 20 pound gunny sack. They’re using more words than they really need to, and so I look at that a lot.”

Likewise, all of the auctioneers interviewed in my fieldwork suggested that overuse of filler words is a marker of poor bid-calling style because the unnecessary complication not only distracts listeners from the numbers, but that it also inappropriately emphasizes style at the expense of function and clear communication.

Thus, style itself must be handled carefully. While the distinctive style of the auctioneer is key to the successful completion of a sale, an economical employment of stylized gestures and components is considered good practice within the auction community. Denise Shearin states, “Irrespective of your speed, your tone, or anything else, you have to be clear in what you’re saying, or

40 Behr, interview.
you’re not gonna get the bid. For me, I think first and foremost is clarity. The buyers have to know what you’re saying.”41 A similar emphasis on clarity was articulated by every instructor at World Wide College of Auctioneering. The importance of clarity in a practice known for its incomprehensibility seems contradictory, but all auctioneers encountered in my research stressed that an auctioneer must balance speed, filler word distortion, pitch change, and rhythmic variety in such a way that the numbers, and thus the status of the sale, is itself never unclear. The stylized aspects of the bid-call, some of which are intended to surprise and mystify the listener, can be utilized only to the extent that they do not interfere with the efficient progress of the sale.

It is not surprising, then, that the stylistic and aesthetic values articulated by auctioneers in auction school and in my fieldwork are echoed in the judging criteria used for bid-calling competitions. The three primary national/international bid-calling competitions conducted in the United States, The World Livestock Auctioneer Championship, The World Automobile Auctioneers Championship, and the International Auctioneer Championship, assess bid-calling style based on a similar set of evaluative criteria to those deemed most important by the auctioneers in my research. While bid-calling style is only one of the qualities judged in competition (others include appearance, professionalism, product knowledge, salesmanship, etc.), each competition

41 Shearin, interview.
qualifies those aspects of bid-calling that contribute to an aesthetically pleasing chant. The World Livestock Auctioneer Championship judging criteria include “clarity of chant and voice quality.” Appendix B provides the judges’ score cards for both the World Automobile Auctioneers Championship and the International Auctioneer Championship. Like the World Livestock Auctioneer Championship, the World Automobile Auctioneers Championship criteria are brief and general, citing “clarity and rhythm of chant/voice quality,” as the key stylistic characteristics for which a contestant will be assessed. The International Auctioneer Championship, sponsored by the National Auctioneers Association, provides the most detailed list of stylistic qualities for competition judging in their judge’s score sheets. Here, bid-calling is judged in three main categories: presentation, chant/voice, and effective auctioneering. Of the three categories, forty-five percent of a contestant’s score is determined by the “style” category of chant/voice (compared to twenty percent for presentation and thirty-five percent for effective auctioneering). Within the style category, a contestant is assessed on:

1) Voice Control (pitch/breaking voice), 5 points
2) Clarity, 10 points
3) Speed (too fast/too slow), 10 points
4) Rhythm, 10 points
5) Voice Expression/ Use of Filler words, 10 points

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43 Ibid.
Auctioneers, then, share an aesthetic value system, and this system can be seen in the competition judging criteria used by the auction profession and its professional associations. However, insider knowledge of the auction-specific terms “rhythm,” and “pitch,” and a sensitivity to the careful and balanced use of stylized techniques such as speed and filler words are necessary to understand the overall aesthetic quality of an auction chant.

Style in auctioneering is shaped by a variety of intersecting elements. Bid-calling as a performed practice, possesses a set of general stylistic attributes such as speed and filler word distortion, but these attributes vary and assume specific qualities based on the type of sale conducted. Within sales types, each auctioneer develops a personal style that may be influenced by mentor auctioneers and auction school instruction, but which includes individual gestures and approaches to pitch, rhythm, filler words, and distortion. As an increasingly homogeneous bid-calling style develops in the United States, a stylistic framework exists that is flexible enough to accommodate the rapid-fire, distortion-heavy styles of the automobile auctioneer and the slower-paced, less-ornamented and distorted style of the weekly auction house auctioneer. Within this framework, each individual auctioneer finds and articulates his own voice.
Although the auctioneer stands alone in front of the crowd, consumed in a virtuosic solo performance, that very performance is shaped by the audience. Auctioneering represents a form of participatory music making in which a structured social group acts collectively to create the musical product of the bid-call. Without the information provided by the bidding audience, the auctioneer does not have the necessary material with which to activate both the formulaic and improvisatory strategies that constitute the auction chant, nor can he achieve a flow state. Auctioneers confirm this connection between audience activity and chant performance when they explain that ideal chant conditions are achieved only when the audience performs particular types of bidding behaviors and interactions with them. As such, the social structure of the live auction can be viewed as a localized participatory musical community dependent upon the

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251 In characterizing auctioneering as performance, I am informed by Richard Bauman’s characterization of verbal art as performance as an act in which the performer exhibits a level of “communicative competence” to an audience who, in turn, may critique that competence in regard to effective communication, style, and skill. Further, the performance contributes to an “enhancement of experience” such that that it can be enjoyed for its expressive qualities and the emotional intensity it affords the event. See Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 11.
roles of multiple “players” for the performance of the bid-call and for the ritual transformation it facilitates. The special performance context, the creation and maintenance of social structure among the auction-goers, and the stylized communicative practice of the auction chant transform the mundane transfer of goods into a musical and social performance.

**Constructing a Participatory Community at the Auction**

My consideration of participatory performance qualities in auctioneering is influenced largely by the work of Thomas Turino, whose theory outlines specific social and musical characteristics common to participatory musics. Turino is careful to qualify those types of music he defines as participatory, although he notes that a degree of participation can be identified in virtually any musical behavior. For the development of a socio-musical analytical model, though, participatory musics share fundamental characteristics. Turino explains:

I am using the idea of participation in the restricted sense of actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments when each of these activities is considered integral to the performance. In fully participatory occasions there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants. Attention is on the sonic and kinesic interaction among participants. Participatory performance is a particular field of activity in which stylized sound and motion are conceptualized most importantly as heightened social interaction.\(^{252}\)

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\(^{252}\) Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28. Turino differentiates participatory music from presentational music by the constitution and role of the audience. In participatory music, all audience members may be or may become performing agents and the event is constructed to encourage a maximum number of
The heightened social interaction mediated by the auction chant achieves its ideal state when the auctioneer is rolling and bidders are actively participating.

An auctioneer is capable of rolling when the audience is not just active, but active in a way that conforms to the rhythm established by the auctioneer.

Peter Gehres explains this relationship when he comments:

The zone for me is, you know, we have an engaged crowd. We have an informed crowd: people know what we’re selling and they allow me to control the auction in terms of bid increments. They bid both in a rhythm that works with my chant, works with me, and there’s not a lot of waiting. And it’s also not a lot of frustration because you actually have auctions where people bid too much—and that’s hard to believe, but you have, you know, just this kind of over-enthusiasm for bidding that doesn’t really allow you to get any kind of rhythm. You say, ‘I want a thousand,’ and four hands go up…

Gehres’s description indicates that when an auctioneer is rolling, the audience occupies the same musical space as the auctioneer, acting in sync with the tempo and meter of the chant.

The musical structure of the bid-call facilitates the auctioneer’s ability to achieve flow by providing an immediate entrée into an altered sense of time.

The musical organization of time in regard to meter(s), recurring rhythmic patterns, and generally steady tempos differentiates the chant from normal speech, placing the auctioneer and the audience in virtual time (as discussed in participants, while in presentational music, the delineations between performer and audience members are clear and separate (Turino, 26).

253 Gehres, interview.
chapter 4). For auctioneer Darrah Williams, rolling is a musical state in which all
participants are united in the virtual time of the chant. This state of rolling need
not be isolated to individual sales, but can span multiple sales when the
auctioneer and her staff are operating in a shared musical space:

> Usually it take a few items to get into it and get rolling and get where
> you’re just on the mark and on the money and then you just go. I mean
> you go almost into auto-pilot. You could just go and go and go and go
> and go. And it just doesn’t stop. It just like somebody winds you up and,
> like a little wind-up toy, and you just keep going and going and going. It
> takes a few minutes to get into that rhythm. But once you hit that rhythm,
> it just goes. And if your crew and you are in sync and your ring people
> and your staff, boy, you can be very effective.254

In order to connect in the shared musical space of the auction chant, the
disparate collection of audience members, auction staff and auctioneer must
unite as one social group, albeit a group comprised of competing interests and
goals.

> While a professional, dealer, or specialized collectible auction may be
> comprised of a bidding audience which is itself already part of a structured
> community (local car dealers, regional tobacco professionals, area Carnival art
> glass collectors, etc.), most auctions are public, and as such, bring together
diverse groups of people who are primarily unacquainted with each other. The
auctioneer, then, serves a crucial role in creating what I call a temporary auction
community during the performance. Sociologist Charles Smith describes such an
event when he states:

254 Williams, interview.
There are times when whatever sense of community exists is largely dependent upon the auctioneer. This is the situation in many country-style auctions, in which most of the participants are strangers and not only to each other but to the auctioneer. In order to draw casual buyers into the auction, the auctioneer must create the ambience of a community. Without this sense of community, there is unlikely to be either the sense of trust or the social dynamics of mutual contagion which are necessary for a successful country auction.²⁵⁵

Although Smith is referring specifically to country auctions, his comments concerning community are true for virtually all public auctions, and even in the case of professional and specialized community auctions, the auctioneer is still charged with facilitating the immediate creation of an “ambience of community” among bidders of competing interests and motivations who, despite their shared professional responsibilities or collecting interests, may share little else in common with their fellow bidders.

Auctions, staged as they are as cultural performances, provide the opportunity to construct such a group, and the musical chant of the bid-call further structures the temporary community of bidders and auction staff.²⁵⁶


²⁵⁶ Here “cultural performance” refers to the structure described by Bauman, 28: “Cultural performances tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community. They are, as a rule, scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bounded, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community.” (Bauman, 28) A live auction conforms to Bauman’s description of cultural performance; whether it be at a tobacco warehouse, a car lot, an auction barn, or a multi-million dollar horse boarding and auction theater complex, the events are scheduled for specific times, held in locations reserved and staged specifically for
Smith suggests that auctioneers “manage…the sense of community by decreasing the sense of social distance among the participants,” citing interaction with audience members in the form of personal references and jokes as mechanisms by which the auctioneer facilitates this decrease in social distance.

However, it is the music of the auction that maintains this connection throughout the sale by offering the audience a shared musical experience. Anthropologist Richard Bauman explains the way in which performance creates such an opportunity:

It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it.

The auction setting creates a physical space in which a special form of communication takes place between auctioneer and audience, characterized by the stylized practice of the bid-call. Removed from normal time and transported by means of the bid-call into the virtual time of a specialized musical communication, the audience becomes one social group unified by the “special enhancement of experience” provided by the musical performance of the

the performance, and conducted by trained performers who are clearly separated from the audience and featured for their rare and specialized talents.

257 Smith, 56.

258 Bauman, 43-4.
auctioneer whose practice directs the exciting and unpredictable actions of the sale. Further, the attendees at a live auction are socially structured not only as an audience to whom a musical performance is presented, but also as a pool of potential bidders and winners. “Participative energies” are a natural by-product of the transactional function of the auction: group members must participate in order to conduct a sale, but the auctioneer’s musical performance heightens the emotional experience of the participants by providing the special context within which these activities occur. Ultimately, the performance facilitates a situation in which the audience becomes part of the process, and as such, become members of a distinct, though temporary, community.

The music of the bid-call offers not only a heightened emotional experience for auction attendees, but an opportunity for audience participation, which, in return, further reinforces the structure of the temporary auction community—a group defined not only by its shared location and transactional function, but by its participatory role in the auction performance. Specific musical attributes of the bid-call create the potential for shared musical experience and, ultimately, participation, the foremost of these being rhythm. Charles Smith argues that the rhythmic structure provided by the bid-call is a key to the function of the chant because it imposes order on an otherwise unordered and potentially chaotic social process, providing structure to the temporary community of bidders and potential bidders:
The truth is that the importance of the chant does not lie in its role as price monitor. Its major function is rather to orchestrate the auction rhythm. The chant controls the temporal order of an auction, the movement of the bids. Its importance is underscored when we remember the extent to which auctions are ripe with uncertainty and ambiguity. The chant introduces form where it is sorely lacking.\textsuperscript{259}

When an auctioneer can successfully unify the bidding audience by means of a shared rhythmic context, he is then able to control, define, and instigate changes by introducing strategic interjections and/or disruptions to the musical flow of the chant.

Though the music of the bid-call plays a significant role in unifying the participants at the live auction and controlling the volatile social and economic dynamics of the sale, musical performance itself is not a goal that the temporary community shares. The extent to which the bid-call is functionally integrated into the practical conditions of the sale necessarily qualifies it as different from presentational musical practices. As such, the participants in an auction performance are not concerned with the way that the overall performance sounds or appears to nonparticipants. The performance is not crafted for presentation purposes, and while those involved may be concerned with the transactional nature of the activity, they are not concerned with creating an aesthetic musical product for consumption by non-participants.

It would be inaccurate to characterize the participants in a live auction as so engaged with the musical performance that they are unconcerned with an end

\textsuperscript{259} Smith, 117.
result. Perhaps more than any other aspect of auctioneering, this fact separates the practice from most forms of musical activity. It is true that the auctioneer strives to remove the audience from normal life to the extent that they will allow themselves to be taken over by the excitement of the auction. Indeed, the bid-call itself is designed to limit the amount of time a bidder has to consider his decisions, encouraging the bidder to act automatically, bid liberally, and without regard for financial concern. However, neither the audience nor the auctioneer is ever completely divorced from the functional reality of the event. It is unlikely that any of the participants have purely aesthetic or musical goals in the auction performance. The reality of the practical, economic transaction is never absent from the scenario. The effective auctioneer may be able to defer considerations of transactional reality briefly during the frenzy of the chant, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that participants engage in auction performance with regard only for the musical performance itself.

However, it is not the case that auction-goers participate in auctions for purely economic reasons. Charles Smith writes:

In fact, for many buyers and some sellers, the opportunity to be part of the auction production is the main reason for participating. They are drawn to auctions as amateur thespians are drawn to amateur community theater groups....Though some are intimidated by being part of a performance, most regular attenders love the collective venture. It isn’t just the glamour and celebrity status associated with the grand sales auctions that attract them. Neither is it the opportunity for self-expression and the sense of personal power, although these, too, may be attractive. It is rather the sense of belonging to a creative community which attracts them. As one amateur auction enthusiast responded when asked what he liked best
about auctions, “It’s being part of the auction. You get a chance to put your two bits in.”

Smith’s comments cite the structured creative community as a fundamental motivation for audience participation. Audience members enjoy being part of the social structure and can demonstrate their role as community member by participating in the shared activity of the group. Audience members often participate, not intending to win an item, but rather for the excitement of being part of the action and, as a result, part of the social structure created and maintained by the live performance. The National Auctioneers Association confirmed in a 2004 Harris Interactive Survey that the number one reason auction-goers list for attending an auction is for fun. 

Thus, auction-goers are expecting a rewarding, entertaining experience. The desire for a positive social and emotional experience is just as powerful for the auction-goer as are the practical concerns about an end product. Though participants at an auction are certainly interested in the practical results of bidding and goods transfer, they also experience some degree of autonomy from those concerns, motivated as much, if not more so, by an interest in the activity itself.

Because the primary goal of the audience and auctioneer is not a musical one, assessment of aesthetic and performance value is contingent on a different set of criteria than those commonly applied to presentational musics. Turino

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260 Smith, 122-3.

261 Chris Longly, email message to author, October 25, 2010.
indicates that value in such participatory performances is contingent upon the character and degree of participation when he states that, “Participatory values are distinctive in that the success of a performance is more importantly judged by the degree and intensity of participation than by some abstracted assessment of the musical sound quality.” While it is true that the abstract musical sound quality of the bid-call and the rhythmically coordinated behaviors of the bidding audience are rarely, if ever, critiqued by either auctioneer or audience, and that the auction community is most likely to deem a sale a success if there were multiple active bidders and the auctioneer was rolling, the other primary marker of value at the conclusion of an auction is, of course, the financial result. For the auctioneer, a sale is a success if bidders were active and prices were high; conversely, if there was active bidding but most items sold for less than expected, the auctioneer is unlikely to deem the performance a success. For the bidding audience, a sale may be exciting if the prices are high, but may also be considered a success if the prices are consistently low and they were able to achieve bargains. Thus, auctions introduce different evaluative criteria to the equation than either a participatory or presentational practice because of the immediate transactional nature of the performance.263

262 Turino, 33.

263 At the same time, financial and transactional concerns are not unique to the auction setting. While the participants in a participatory musical event may consider the performance a success in regard to active participation, they may
Shared Agency, Bidder Proficiency and Performance Dynamics in the Bid-Call

Because the auction environment is one of shared musical context into which bidding actions are integrated, roles such as “performer” and “audience member” may not be entirely accurate descriptors for those in attendance. If the auctioneer relies on the audience to provide the bid information, the competition, and the actions necessary to inform the creative construction of the auction chant, then the bidders themselves have some degree of agency in the chant process. The bidding audience is encouraged to bid in time with the rhythm established by the auctioneer, and thus this audience is not comprised of passive viewers, but rather participatory agents. Philosopher Charles Taylor characterizes such rhythmically coordinated actions involving multiple agents as dialogical (“acts of more than one agent”) rather than monological (“acts of a single agent”), explaining that dialogical activities such as ballroom dancing can only be performed successfully when the participants’ “component action” is conducted have to worry about (and cater their performance to concerns regarding) whether a performance makes enough money to compensate the organizers or performers, how to pay for a performance space, or how to pay for instruments and equipment. The difference in an auction performance is that the transactional nature of the event is woven into the performance with a degree of transparency uncommon to most musical activities. The exchange of goods, services, and monies in regard to most musical activities are often conducted in private before or after the event and are infrequently addressed during the musical performance itself.
in relation to a common rhythm.\textsuperscript{264} One of the primary functions of the bid-call is to provide the frame within which such a dialogical action can occur.

The auctioneer, auction staff (in particular, ringmen) and bidders are all agents in the performance of the bid-call. The auctioneer possesses a different type of agency than that of the audience member, however, in as much as he is charged with organizing and translating the actions of the bidding agents into a coherent bid-call. Conversely, the bidding audience relies on the auctioneer to clarify and update the auction status, and to do so in an entertaining and effective way that, in return, elicits more bids. While the auctioneer may hold a special position in the performance, he cannot act alone, and thus, the bid-call is the product of an integrated agent consisting of the multiple actors necessary to conduct the transfer of goods by means of the auction chant performance.

However, participatory agency, even within the bidding audience, is not entirely equal. An audience member can only participate in the musical performance to the extent that he is willing and able to afford the current asking price. Because of the transactional function of the live auction, participation is contingent upon economic condition. “Fun bidders” (discussed in chapter 6) manage to participate in the musical performance regardless of ability to purchase an item, but do so only at the beginning when prices are low. Thus, the

The success of an auction requires a qualified integrated agency, however. Auctions are staged to separate the auctioneer from the audience both in terms of physical placement and in terms of the auctioneer’s cultural capital, manifest in his special skills as a bid-caller and master of ceremonies. While the auctioneer seeks to reinforce social structure within the bidding audience, the community is still divided, and that division is necessary for the cultural performance of the auction. No degree of social structure and community-building on the part of the auctioneer will make all attendees equal participants. Indeed, the goals and interests of each person present at an auction are necessarily opposed. The auctioneer is the seller’s agent and as such is charged with achieving the highest sales price possible for each item. The bidders’ interest is, of course, to acquire sale items for the lowest possible price. Additionally, each interested bidder is in direct competition with other interested bidders for sale items. These conflicting interests constitute the necessary conditions for the excitement and unpredictability of the sale, and thus, the social structuring of the auction.

Further, different types of auctions may have their own regulations regarding admission into the bidding audience. While a weekly auction house sale is necessarily open to all bidders, an auction such as the Keeneland racehorse yearling sale will require bank confirmation of credit in order to issue a bidding number. Thus, the special conditions with which bidders are accepted into the temporary community of an auction will restrict and define the participatory group.
audience and staff as one localized community is characterized most notably by their shared, coordinated, and reciprocal activities within a context of established, necessary, and maintained social difference.

The auction chant allows the interaction between audience and auctioneer to seem smooth and coordinated even when it is not. Each bidder has a choice regarding how he enters into the rhythmic exchange; a bidder can place bids at any point and need not do so in sync with the auctioneer’s bid-call.266 The trained auctioneer, in turn, can choose when to acknowledge and incorporate each new bid and will always attempt to do so in a way that conforms to the established rhythm of the chant. Thus, the chant invites bidders to act within a common rhythm but also provides mechanisms for normalizing “out-of-rhythm” bidding activities within the established pulse and meter of the chant.

Because the practice of bid-calling employs a significant degree of formulaic structure, audience members can quickly develop a familiarity with the auctioneer’s style after even a few minutes of the sale. Accordingly, audience members experience a stylistic and structural entrainment much like the metric entrainment they experience as they hear the bid-call. It does not take long to become aware of an auctioneer’s closing gestures, stylistic indications of intense or stalled bidding, rhythmic diminutions indicative of increased competition and

266 The process of metric entrainment, discussed in chapter 4, encourages but does not guarantee that bidders will act in sync with the pulse and meter of the chant. The metric flexibility exhibited by auctioneers represents one strategy for handling bids placed at musically difficult or awkward points in the chant.
excitement, etc. As the auction-goer hears stylistic gestures used in similar situations over the course of one day’s sale or, as is often the case, over the span of many sales, he is better able to function as a participating agent in the auction by reacting to the auctioneer’s prompts appropriately and with special insider knowledge of the auctioneer’s style. I call this acquired skill “bidder proficiency.”

I do not mean to suggest that the bidder is consciously aware of this entrainment. While frequent auction-goers may be able to describe some aspects of an auctioneer’s personal style in musical detail, they register most aspects of bid-calling style, formulaic structure, and strategy on a subconscious level. In fact, just as bid-calling itself is an embodied practice for the auctioneer, informed bidding behavior is also an embodied practice for the auction-goer. The extent to which an auction-goer has attained bidder proficiency will determine his ability to join in the shared musical space of the auction as a participating member of the sale. To create the necessary conditions for the ideal flow state on the part of the auctioneer, all audience members would possess a moderate to high level of bidder proficiency.

The entrainment process that leads to bidder proficiency is developed over both the short term and long term as a form of intermusical knowledge. Describing intermusicality as a general musical phenomenon, Ingrid Monson explains that, “people hear music over time as well as in time; that is, they listen in relation to all the musics they have heard before, recognizing in particular
performances similarities, differences, quotations, allusions, and surprises that contextualize their hearing in the moment.” Proficient bidders can develop intermusical knowledge of an individual auctioneer’s style, formulaic structures and common improvisatory practices, and can also expand upon their abilities to interpret and critique bid-calling styles through exposure to different auctioneers over time. Both types of intermusicality increase bidder proficiency by providing an accumulated collection of information about auctioneering performance practice, auction dynamics and bidder behaviors. As the auctioneer must learn to interpret and process non-linguistic pressures through accumulated practice and auction experience, so can the informed bidder. Like the auctioneer, the proficient bidder then uses this information as a performing agent in the sale. When the well-trained auctioneer performs with a group of proficient bidders, rolling is most likely to occur because he and his bidding audience are engaged in a rhythmically and socially coordinated act. Accordingly, public, general audience auctions can be the most difficult scenarios in which to achieve the roll, in contrast to professional and dealer auctions where audiences have a high level of bidder proficiency. The creation of a temporary community in public auctions becomes all the more important in these situations, as the structure allows the auctioneer and more proficient bidders to model common effective practices to a bidding audience who may be acquiring

intermusical skills for the first time. The development of intermusicality among auction-goers further reinforces the social structure of the auction community as it provides audience members with a shared ability to contextualize and appropriately respond to the auctioneer’s linguistic and musical patterns.

In the participatory conditions of a live auction, the auctioneer is as much an instrument of the audience as he is a director of musical activities. Proficient bidders and ringmen both contribute to the sound of the musical event through shouts, cries, and other verbal interjections, and each of these actions is a direct cue to the auctioneer that produces immediate musical results in the chant. The audience members and ringmen elicit new sounds, rhythms, meter changes, and melodic gestures from the auctioneer through their bidding behaviors.

Furthermore, the auctioneer must consider all attendees as possible bidders, and as such, must tailor the musical product of the auction chant to appeal to and possibly excite latent audience members into active bidding. Turino writes, “While not everyone has to be playing or dancing all the time, a general sense is created that people who do not participate at all are somehow shirking their social responsibility by not being sociable.” However, this is not the case at an auction, as audience inaction (not bidding) is, in fact, a form of agency as well. Thus, an absence of bids from the audience provides a cue to the auctioneer just as active bids do. Their inaction instructs the auctioneer to

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268 Turino, 29-30.
remain at a certain number (which, in turn, has specific rhythmic and metric implications in the chant) and to employ strategic improvisatory gestures to excite slowed or stopped bidding.

While the musical performance of the auction requires shared agency between audience and auctioneer, the balance between auctioneer and audience is a precarious one. When asked to speak about their role in the live auction, auctioneers frequently refer to the importance of control. Clearly, the auctioneer must direct the audience through the sale of each item and project a sense of control over the proceedings, but he is reliant upon the bidders’ actions, without which he lacks the raw materials for the construction of the bid-call. As an auctioneering student, I grappled with (and witnessed many fellow students grapple with) the ability to control the chant when all elements of the performance seemed to be up to the whims and behaviors of the audience. Bids placed out of time with the rhythm of my chant, irregular bidding intervals, excessively fast or slow bidding, unexpected stalls in bidding, audience members walking into and out of the auction, intentional tricks or playful bidding tactics employed by attendees, and side conversations all amounted to a daunting and seemingly unmanageable challenge. How could I maintain an aura of control when everything I did in the auction chant was influenced by the unpredictable actions of others? Darrah Williams is unreserved in her assessment when asked if the auctioneer needs to be in control:
Definitely. 100% of the time. Never lose control! Don’t ever lose control!...If you lose control of the auction, they can smell it. It’s like chum in the water....No, you cannot lose control. You have to maintain a certain demeanor. And if you lose control, you are just screwed....You can’t ever let them think they have the power.269

Darrell Cannon agrees, stating, “You need to be the one in control no matter what.”270 Cannon goes on to describe a typical situation in which the auctioneer’s control is challenged by a bidder:

They’ll do things, you know. You’re asking for ten and they’ll give you this one finger, which means a dollar to them. To me it means ten. And I’ll put ‘em in and keep going. And when they get all flustered then and say, “No, no, no, no, no! I said one!” That’s where you’ve gotta regain that control: “I’m sorry, you acknowledged me and the number I was asking. This will go a lot quicker if you just let me call the numbers.” And they usually get the hint, and they’ll back off a bit. You know, you’ll always get one of those insistent ones. And I’ve gone as far as to ignore them. And sell them out. If they want to bid a dollar on everything, I’ll put things together and get five—because I’m not gonna cater to them—and pull that control back from them.271

The participatory nature of the auction is thus complicated by the competing financial interests of the auctioneer and the bidder, and this competition can manifest itself in the auction as a struggle for control of the sale. Bidders can use a variety of tactics to misdirect the auctioneer or assume control of the auction.

Bidders often attempt to “split the bid,” meaning that they will indicate a smaller incremental increase than the one the auctioneer is requesting. For example, if

269 Williams, interview.

270 Cannon, interview.

271 Ibid.
the auctioneer has a fifty dollar bid and asks for one hundred, a bidder may shout or physically indicate twenty-five, meaning that he will bid seventy-five dollars, but not one hundred. If the auctioneer accepts this split bid, then his number increments have to change which, accordingly, may interrupt or otherwise alter the rhythmic flow he has established in the chant. Bidders will also hesitate, waiting as long as possible to register a new bid, or interrupt the auctioneer in the process of the sale. Auctioneers generally view these behaviors as attempts to undermine their control.

Bidders are aware that they can challenge the auctioneer and assume control over the auction by variety of behaviors, but the most fluid and successful (i.e. enjoyable and musically satisfying) chant occurs when the power dynamic between auctioneer and bidder dissolves into a coordinated participatory state. Tension exists, then, in the opposition between musical participation and personal agendas. The fragile balance that the temporary community structure provides to the group of auction staff and auction-goers is constantly threatened by the competing interests of all participants. In this case, the music of the chant becomes a crucial mediating factor, reinforcing a participatory structure for a group poised to compete for power.

**The Music of Participation**

The participatory nature of the auction performance results in specific musical characteristics in the bid-call because the bid-call is reliant upon
participation by the bidding audience for the linguistic and, by extension, musical formulae that comprise the chant. Ultimately, the chant itself arises from the musical translation of actions by bidder agents encouraged by the auctioneer and the auction community, making it a result of and musical representation of the participatory social structure.

The music of the bid-call employs many of the sound characteristics of participatory music as described in Turino’s theory:

1) Short, open, redundantly repeated forms
2) “Feathered” beginnings and endings
3) Intensive variation
4) Individual virtuosity downplayed
5) Highly repetitive
6) Few dramatic contrasts
7) Constancy of rhythm/meter/groove
8) Dense textures
9) Piece as a collection of resources refashioned anew in performance like the form, rules, and practiced moves of a game

Those sounding aspects of the chant that do not fit easily into Turino’s participatory model are generally those guided by specific legal and transactional dictates of the auction. Indeed, the balance of power between auctioneer and audience reveals auctioneering as unique among most musical practices: the auction’s performance requires musically-coordinated participation, and the control of its musical product through the auctioneer’s chanted translation of social process. All the while, the auctioneer maintains a

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272 Turino, 59.
sense of control through the specialized, virtuosic role he assumes in the performance, even when agency is shared to a great degree.

Because Turino’s model is designed to examine ensemble performances, he finds that dense musical textures are common. For the monophonic chant practice of auctioneering, texture is not a concern. The soundscape of the entire auction setting, however, can be characterized as one of dense texture involving competing sound sources engaged in the auction performance. While the auctioneer’s chant is the prominent voice in the performance, ringmen’s shouts, bidders’ calls and verbal responses to the auctioneer and fellow bidders create a dense layer of sound that is not only part of the event, but also part of the social performance of the auction.

With the exception of some real estate sales, each discrete sale in an auction is usually quite short. Efficiency is prioritized in order to conduct the dozens or hundreds of individual sales contained in a single auction. While an auctioneer may spend a slight amount of additional time attempting to extract the last few bids at the end of the sale, auctioneers are taught to conclude sales as quickly as possible without lingering too long for one final bid. The short form of the chant is not only practical in terms of managing the total number of sales in an auction, but also serves a specific purpose: short auction times (with very short transitions between lots) create momentum for the entire auction, carrying over the urgency affected by the auction chant to a sense of continuous motion between sales as well. Short forms also support the internal momentum of each
sale. When the audience knows that a sale will only last thirty, sixty, or ninety seconds, they feel pressured to act quickly or lose out on the opportunity to bid.

The degree to which beginnings and endings are “feathered” varies depending on the auctioneer. Turino explains that feathered openings and closings occur when, “the start and conclusion of the piece are not sharply delineated.”

As discussed in chapter 3, many auctioneers have fixed patterns by which they enter into and out of the chant. Openings are often feathered; when the auctioneer seeks the opening bid, he may have to call a few numbers before receiving the first bid. As such, it is common for an auctioneer to open in a halting speech-chant mixture before launching into the chant with the first true bid. Some auctioneers are extremely clear with their beginnings, however, shifting into chant immediately with the first bid request. Endings, in particular, cannot be “feathered” due to the legal requirements placed upon the auctioneer. Each auction must have a clear and definitive conclusion so that the bidding audience is aware of the winning bid, the winning bidder, the close of the sale, and the legal transfer of the item from seller to buyer. The bid close represents a moment in the bid-call where music making ceases its participatory character and reverts to the control of the auctioneer.

Intensive variation, involving, “subtle variations added within, or on top of, the basic musical material” avoids the potential monotony of direct

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273 Turino, 38.
repetition. Auctioneer Denise Shearin explains, “...part of being an auctioneer is being able to keep your buyers engaged, and for me, being able to change my tone or speed it up a little bit, or, you know, put some filler words in there, even to occasionally—in the middle of bid-calling—stop and use just a normal talking voice, you know, create a variety.” The basic formulaic materials of the chant undergo rhythmic or metric expansion or contraction, alternate melodic or intervallic settings, and improvised interjections within an otherwise consistent and predictable group of patterns such that the chant retains interest for the listeners and allows for the element of surprise.

The use of repetition, a significant component of Turino’s model, is closely connected to the formulaic practices of the auctioneer. A limited number of formulae are repeated frequently during the bid-call, and while auctioneers will differ in the extent to which they modify formulae or how much formulaic variety they include in their chant, individual formulae are commonly repeated dozens of times within a short auction. Repetitive musical gestures provide the audience with predictable patterns so that they can understand the progression of the auction without becoming confused or distracted by constantly changing musical material. Repetitive musical gestures enable the quick development of intermusicality on the part of audience members who, within only a few sales at

274 Ibid.

275 Shearin, interview.
an auction, are likely to have accustomed themselves to the recurring, predictable patterns established by the auctioneer through repetition.

While constancy and fluidity are prioritized in the construction of the chant both for their formulaic efficiency and their ability to unite the auction community through the creation of a relatively predictable musical space, contrast is limited primarily to those moments when the auctioneer strategically introduces a distinct change to the rhythmic, metric, and melodic qualities established in the chant. Likewise, dramatic interjections are effective tools in moderation, but when overused erode the power and aesthetic value of the chant. The bid-call is, by nature, constant, repetitive, and cyclical.

**Transformative Chant: Ritual and Music in the Auction**

The auctioneer does not perform on the concert stage, nor does he publish recordings of his chant for sale as an art or entertainment product. He chants to sell. Music, for the auctioneer, is a special sales tool that facilitates a transactional event. The Missouri Auction School’s 1986 promotional brochure bears the title “Auction…The Sound That Sells,” succinctly expressing the special relationship between music and economic transaction. Moreover, the performance of music as part of this event creates a scenario in which the transfer

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of goods between buyer and seller takes on a ritualistic character. Items are bought and sold every day, but only in an auction is specialized musical performance a transparent conduit for direct consumer trade and the immediate transfer of goods. Most musical performances today are indeed closely connected to financial transactions at many levels, from ticket sales and facility costs to artist compensation and merchandise sales. Additionally, product promotion and advertising appears more and more frequently in musical performance. In auctioneering, however, the function of music as facilitator of sale is transparent in ways that separate it from most other musical activities. In my research, every auctioneer with whom I worked identified themselves as a salesman first, while no auctioneers self-identified as a performing musician. Denver automobile auctioneers Scott Goodhue and Terry Elson express this sentiment in an exchange during an interview at the Mannheim car auction:

Scott: “Our job is to sell cars. We’re glorified salesmen is what we are.”
Terry: “Carnival barkers, I think they call it.”

The ritualized practice of auctioneering relies on music to create a heightened, specialized form of social interaction. The live auction creates a space and structure within which social transformation occurs. Specifically, the ritual of the bid-call facilitates the transfer of goods and the transformation of social roles. Bidders become buyers, sellers are divested of their property, and buyers become owners. While these transformations may seem insignificant at

277 Goodhue and Elson, interview.
the level of individual lots at a large auction, the cumulative effect can be life-changing for the participants. At both the micro and macro levels, social roles are transformed through a controlled process overseen by the auctioneer and conducted through the bid-call. The chant provides a common language with which to conduct these exchanges in a predictable, reproducible manner, facilitating the efficient disposition of goods from their previous owners to their new owners, all the while framing the socially precarious and often volatile situation of the sale as an entertaining participatory musical event.

Social positions, community relationships, family structures, and market conditions can all be transformed through the live auction performance. As such, the auctioneer and the audience are participants in a ritual of social and economic significance on both the personal and social levels. At an estate auction, the sale of each individual item may affect the seller’s social position in a nominal way, the sale of an entire estate over the course of the auction realizes a significant social transformation on the part of the seller. The seller transfers personal property, many pieces of which often bear special emotional value, to members of the auction community through the ritual of the auction. In most cases, these goods are transferred to strangers with whom the seller is only connected through the auction community. It is often the case that such estate sales are necessitated by a death in the family, a divorce, or other financial hardship. As such, the social subtext of the event can be delicate to say the least.

Likewise, real estate sales often represent important transitions both for
the seller and the buyer: whether a foreclosure or an upgrade in financial conditions necessitates the sale of real estate, the social position of the seller undergoes a significant transformation. At the same time, the purchase of land or facilities signifies a change in the social position of the buyer as well. In the case of agricultural land auctions, discussed in chapter 6, the stakes are exceptionally high. Families’ fortunes can be won and lost and their futures determined by the outcome of one day’s sale. In a collector auction where auction prices reflect and can redefine market conditions, yet another kind of transformation takes place. Smith explains, “In fact, whenever an item sells for considerably more than its apparent economic value there is likely to be applause. A new ‘reality’ has been created.”278

The complex social relationships and potential shifts in social position underlying the auction are reduced to functional, ritualized positions and behaviors on the part of the bidding audience and the auctioneer in order to neutralize the exchange and make it safe and comfortable for all to participate. Without a ritualized performance, buyers would be required to directly approach a seller in distress, haggle over items of great personal value, divulge personal financial information, and otherwise engage in awkward and inefficient means of social and economic exchange. Bourdieu notes:

Rite must resolve by means of an operation socially approved and collectively assumed — that is, in accordance with the logic of the

278 Smith, 129.
taxonomy that gives rise to it—the specific contradiction which the primal dichotomy makes inevitable in constituting as separate and antagonistic principles that must be reunited in order to ensure the reproduction of the group.279

It is essential that the auctioneer legitimize the resolution of the conflicting bidders and the transfer of goods through agreed-upon structures. In this case, the musical structures and formulae of the bid-call unite the community through shared and participatory practice in that the group does not dissolve when one bidder does not win the item he desired, or a seller does not realize a desired price for a particular item. Rather, the community agrees to the fairness and transparency of the bid-call performance, conferring upon it and the auctioneer the ability to guide the community through each transformation while maintaining the social structure of the group.

An auction is inherently competitive and represents perhaps the most pure manifestation of fair market transactions in a capitalist society. The creation of the bid-call is necessarily participatory, but participation is limited in regard to financial status. The key to avoiding negative competition and hierarchy that could erode any sense of community among auction-goers is achieved by maintaining the perception of fairness through the predictable structures of ritual. The auctioneer must conduct the sale in such a way that all bidders or potential bidders feel that they have an equal chance to win the item. Because an item’s value is determined directly by the bidding audience, as mediated

279 Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 136.
through the collective performance of the bid-call, the auction process confers this sense of fairness.

**Conclusions**

The functions of a live auction are many: an auction facilitates the transfer of goods, directs the redistribution of wealth and property, defines individual and business relationships, handles the difficult challenges of major life events such as death, divorce, and bankruptcy, makes available the basic material needs for businesses of all kinds, and provides entertainment for various types of communities. The live auction enables the temporary community to conduct and reproduce an efficient transfer of goods and social position. From the basic musical materials of rhythmic, metric and melodic formulae and the participation of bidders in the musical performance of the chant, auctioneers perform an improvised musical practice that both reacts to and structures the community of bidders at the auction, guiding the group through a series of transformational rituals. That the auction profession has adopted a musical performance as the mechanism by which a complex set of social and economic transformations take place reveals the power of music to perform and enact socio-economic change.

The study of auctioneering as improvised musical practice contributes to an ever-broadening understanding of music as a defining and structuring element in temporary communities. That this practice has been essentially absent from musical consideration until now suggests the power that existing
classifications of presentational music have over what and how we study music making. In the case of auction chant, concepts of musical value, improvisatory strategy, and musical form are only partially evident in examination of the specific musical materials with which auctioneers craft the bid call. Rather, the practical outcome of a sale in dollars and cents and the extent to which audience members are engaged as active participants testify to the successful musical performance and direct the employment of musical and improvisatory techniques on the part of the performer.

Auctioneering can inform the study of improvisational performance by offering a model of hybrid formulaic and creative practice. The auctioneer’s flexible use of meter invites us to examine the role that meter plays in other improvisational practices, and suggests that the complex relationship between formulaic structures and non-linguistic demands in improvised performance can yield patterned musical structures of special, plastic responsiveness to the emergent performance conditions. The use of quasi-pentatonic collections and pentatonic subsets characterized by fulcrum movement to and from a foundational hum pitch resists functional harmonic classification, but represents a standardized pitch practice among auctioneers that facilitates an unceasing musical product capable of responding to the ever-changing events of the auction in a seamless manner.

The auctioneer rarely considers himself or herself a musician, but the art of the bid-call is rich in complex musical techniques. Further, the auctioneer
manifests distinct improvisatory strategies in order to create a heightened emotional experience within which items are bought and sold. Under the skilled musical direction of the auctioneer, daily acts of commerce are recast as musical events, experiences rife with excitement, anticipation, tension, and aesthetic pleasure.
APPENDIX A

WORLD WIDE COLLEGE OF AUCTIONEERING: DAILY DOZENS

Figure A1. Tongue Twisters & Number Scales

The Finest Education for the Auction Profession

World Wide College of Auctioneering
P.O. Box 949
Mason City, Iowa 50402-0949
Phone: 641-423-5242
Fax: 641-423-3067
www.worldwidecollegeofauctioneering.com

Since 1933

TONGUE TWISTERS & NUMBER SCALES
The Daily Dozen Drills to a Successful Chant
(Loud and Clear)

1. BIG BROWN BUG: The big brown bug bit a big brown bear. (very good beginning t.i.) 10x

2. TOMMY ATTATIMUS: Tommy Attatimus took two T’s tied them to the top of two tall trees. (basic tongue exercise) 10x

3. THE HANDLE/HAMMER: The handle goes up and the hammer comes down (simple and effective) 10x

4. RUBBER BABY BUGGY BUMPER: Rubber baby buggy bumper. (a very good drill for getting the tongue to pop in the mouth, creating a roll) 10x

5. ENGINE ENGINE # 9: Engine, engine # 9 running down Chicago line, if the engine jumps the track, you will get your money back. (Excellent for creating rhythm) 10x

6. AROUND THE RUFF & RUGGED ROCK: Around the ruff and rugged rock the ragged rascal ran. (Very good tongue aerobic drill) 10x

7. WOODCHUCK: How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? A woodchuck would chuck as much wood as a woodchuck could if a woodchuck could chuck wood! (Helps with the C’s and difficult W’s). 10x
8. **BETTY BOTTER**: Betty Botter bought some butter, but she said this butter’s bitter. If I put it in my batter, it will make my batter bitter, so she bought a bit of better butter, put it in her bitter batter, made her bitter batter better, so tis better Betty Botter bought a bit of better butter. (This drill is very good for developing rhythm and flow to a chant) 10x

9. **ONE’S**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43
44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57
58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71
72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85
86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99
100 (Now reverse – count 100 back to 1) 3x

10. **TWO AND A HALVES**

2 1/2 5 7 1/2 10 12 1/2 15 17 1/2 20 22 1/2 25 27 1/2 30 32 1/2 35
37 1/2 40 42 1/2 45 47 1/2 50 52 1/2 55 57 1/2 60 62 1/2 65 67 1/2
70 72 1/2 75 77 1/2 80 82 1/2 85 87 1/2 90 92 1/2 95 97 1/2 100
(Now reverse – count 100 back to 2 1/2) 3x

11. **FIVE’S**

5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50
55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
(Now reverse – count 100 back to 5) 3x

12. **TEN’S**

10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90
90 80 70 60 50 40 30 20 10
(Now reverse – count back to 10)

12. **QUARTERS**

One, one and a quarter, one and a half, one seventy-five
Two, two and a quarter, two and a half, two seventy-five
Three, three and a quarter, three and a half, three seventy-five
Four, four and a quarter, four and a half, four seventy-five
Five, five and a quarter, five and a half, five seventy-five
Six, six and a quarter, six and a half, six seventy-five
Seven, seven and a quarter, seven and a half, seven seventy-five
Eight, eight and a quarter, eight and a half, eight seventy-five
Nine, nine and a quarter, nine and a half, nine seventy-five
Ten, ten and a quarter, ten and a half, ten seventy-five
(Please practice to one hundred)

Source: World Wide College of Auctioneering (reproduced with permission, 2011)
### BID-CALLING COMPETITION JUDGING CRITERIA

#### Figure B1. World Automobile Auctioneers Championship Judging Score Sheets

![Score Card Image](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contestant Name</th>
<th>Lane#</th>
<th>Position</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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1. Clarity and Rhythm of Chant/Voice Quality: (0-20 Pts)

2. Product Knowledge and Salesmanship: (0-20 Pts)
   - (Car Description, Selling Points etc.)

3. Interaction:
   - Communication with Bidders & Buyers (Eye contact/ Body Language etc.) (0-20 Pts)

4. Overall Appearance, Poise and Block Presence: (0-20 Pts)

5. Would you hire this Auctioneer to work for you, as a combination Auctioneer/Representative of your auction on the block? (0-20 Pts)

   (Judges totaling score optional) TOTAL SCORE: 

   Judges Comments (Optional):

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

Source: World Automobile Auctioneers Championship (reproduced with permission, 2011)
Figure B2. International Auctioneers Championship Judging Score Sheets

### Preliminary Bid-Calling Scorecard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Judge No. 1</th>
<th>Judge No. 2</th>
<th>Judge No. 3</th>
<th>Judge No. 4</th>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial Command</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Appearance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Score</strong></td>
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**Chart/Voice**

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<th>Voice Control (pitch/breaking voice)</th>
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<th>Good</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed (too fast, too slow)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhythm</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Expression/Use of Filler Words</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Source: National Auctioneers Association (reproduced with permission, 2011)

### Final Bid-Calling Scorecard

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<th>Judge No. 3</th>
<th>Judge No. 4</th>
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<td>Initial Command</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace</td>
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<td><strong>Score</strong></td>
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**Chart/Voice**

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Source: National Auctioneers Association (reproduced with permission, 2011)


Harris, Elizabeth. “Auction This Day: An Ethnography of Auction Sale Communication, the Situation in Melbourne, Australia.” PhD diss., Department of Linguistics, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1992.


Recordings Cited


