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## Creating an Interpretive Edition of “Sage and Spirit”

MICHAEL CROWLEY

Although it was dropped from the band’s repertoire after its premiere on August 13, 1975, Bob Weir’s instrumental “Sage and Spirit” has received sustained interest among fans and performing musicians. In 2012, guitarist Scott Murray recorded and published his fingerstyle arrangement of the song on YouTube as an instructional video. In 2015, guitarist Teja Gerken was commissioned to arrange and perform it at an event celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the release of *Blues for Allah*; he also published a video of his arrangement on Youtube. In 2017, Holly Bowling published her solo piano arrangement of the piece on YouTube as a way to thank one of her supporters. While these arrangers likely do not consider their work to be scholarship, it is useful to think of their arrangements as contributing to a scholarly conversation around “Sage and Spirit.” This essay describes the creation of another entry in that conversation, an arrangement of the song written in standard musical notation.

Scholars such as Graeme Boone (1997), Melvin Backstrom (2018), Mike Daley (2019/2020), Octavius Longcroft-Wheaton (2020), and David Malvinni (2013) have used musical transcription as a way to accurately describe the Dead’s music for the purpose of analysis. The purpose of this project, however, was to generate a prescriptive score—that is, a work providing detailed performance instructions for guitarists. As someone who has been fascinated with the piece ever since receiving a copy of *One from the Vault* in seventh grade, and having since studied classical guitar along with formal music training, I felt that this project could make a use-

ful contribution to the conversation. My initial idea was to create a kind of self-study tool along the lines of a jazz solo transcription, which isolates one part and excludes the other accompanying instruments. These kinds of scores are used by jazz musicians as a way to understand and learn the melodic lines of great soloists such as Charlie Parker and Joe Pass. The ultimate goal of this practice is not so much to copy the originator but to absorb their vocabulary so that it informs the development of the practitioner's individual musical voice, regardless of the instrument.

For those looking for a deeper understanding of Weir's unique guitar style, a transcription of "Sage and Spirit" provides similarly useful insights. The challenge was to create the score in a textual vocabulary that could be readily understood (even sight-read) by classically trained guitarists. Such a text would also benefit scholars seeking a deeper understanding of the Dead's music, and in particular, Weir's distinctive contribution to it.

### **Conceptual Framework**

David Fricke has written that "Sage and Spirit" was "born out of a warm-up exercise" created by Weir (Fricke 2004, 32). On its surface, the song mimics studies that might be found in a guitarist's practice repertoire. It is texturally reminiscent of a Bach piece, with its constant stream of sixteenth notes in a harmonic language primarily based on consonant triads, but it also reminds me of guitarist-composers like Heitor Villa-Lobos, Leo Brower and others who turned their études into works of art. That model inspired this project, although the form follows what James Grier calls an interpretive edition, also known as a practical or performance score. As Grier explains in *The Critical Editing of Music*, music editing creates a space for a "critical dialogue between work and scholar" (1996, 16). The job of editors is to gather and evaluate all available source materials, including expressions of the work created by others (i.e., not the composer) in the creation of their own interpretation of the work, into what Grier calls "the text."

While editors evaluate and synthesize source materials in an effort to present a text of the work as originally intended by the composer, they do so with the knowledge that it is impossible to produce a definitive version of the work. Editors also understand that any subsequent editions

will differ since these interpretations will be filtered through their editor's subjective understanding of the work's historical context, the musical style employed, and evaluation of the source materials. To provide transparency about editorial decisions and engage other scholars, critically edited scores use footnotes to identify source materials and to provide the rationale for how clear or possible errors were addressed. Sometimes editors even recompose moments in the work they deem to be "impossible within a piece's stylistic boundaries" (2001, 6).

### **Location in a Lineage**

While Grier's concepts were undoubtedly developed with western art music in mind, they usefully apply to any music where recorded performances serve as the primary source of the work—for example, bands such as the Grateful Dead. In the 1970s, the Dead hired Steven Schuster to create lead sheets by transcribing recordings. The job gave Schuster unique insights into the challenges of writing out Grateful Dead music and led to his realization that recomposing was actually an essential part of revealing the "core" of a work:

It took me a long time to learn that I should not write down what the singer was singing but that I should write down what the singer meant to sing if he'd been accurate. And that would reveal the music. But if you wrote it exactly .... you need sixteenth notes ... all the weirdness ... all the out-of-tune things ... Even though they're there ... they did not give you an idea of what the true melody was. (Feinberg 2015, 16:20–19:05)

Although Schuster's job was to create a lead sheet that would serve as the basis for copyright registration, his realization echoes a longstanding idea in musicology. Correcting a source that came directly from the composer is an example of what Grier calls "conjectural emendation." This critical philosophy allows an editor to address errors in a given source and interpolate or invent a remedy, not as a way to "improve" the music but as a way to better communicate the work, as best as the editor understands. This view is predicated on the idea that even composers can make mistakes—in effect, they can get in the way of a clear communication of their work.

One comment of Schuster's requires clarification. He is not saying to avoid using sixteenth notes; in fact, they are used extensively in songbooks like the Dead's *Anthology* (1979). Rather, he is talking about performing with an ambiguous or variable rhythmic articulation, playing at tempi that fall outside of the underlying pulse of the piece being performed. The studio version of "Sage and Spirit" provides a good example of this kind of rhythmic inarticulation or imprecision, with several points where added or dropped beats produce measures that have odd meters. While that may violate accepted notions of "proper" form, according to musicologists and classically trained musicians, in fact that is part of the song's unique qualities and how it achieves its effect in concert—especially as played by the Dead. The challenge for creating a viable and valid transcription, however, is to address these "errors" in a way that does not vitiate the integrity of the work.

Schuster's account of working from performance recordings suggests a basic workflow for notating Grateful Dead music, a process that can be broken into two basic steps: first, transcribe the recording, and second, realize the text, in the form of a manuscript or performance. Holly Bowling adopted the same approach for her arrangement of "Eyes of the World" for solo piano, dividing the work into two separate activities: "first, transcribe it note for note and then arrange it for piano" (Bowling 2016, 0:30-0:43). Transcription has several definitions, but here it loosely refers to the act of translating one expression—the primary source—into another expression, developed by the arranger. Before beginning a transcription, the musician must select what instrumental role to transcribe—one or both guitars, bass, drums, etc.—and how best to present it. The intended audience will also play a role: the level of detail will vary depending on whether one is writing for scholars, performers, or students.

To address the issue of rhythmic inarticulation, I focused on the two projects that attempted to accurately replicate the song as performed by Weir with the Dead. Bowling's solo piano arrangement, which is based on her transcription of the Dead's August 13, 1975, performance of the piece, proved to be quite useful. Bowling chose to transcribe and perform both Weir's guitar part and Phil Lesh's bass part, resulting in an impressive solo piano rendition that highlights the interaction between parts. In

### Sage and Spirit

Music by Bob Weir  
Arranged by Mike Crowley

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a measure marked 'IX' followed by a dashed line. The second staff starts at measure 6. The third staff starts at measure 11 and ends with a 3/4 time signature change. The fourth staff starts at measure 16 and includes a 2/4 time signature change. The fifth staff starts at measure 20. The sixth staff starts at measure 25. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

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**Figure 1.** “Sage and Spirit,” Part 1, by Robert Weir, © Ice Nine Publishing, admin. by WC Music Corp. Arrangement by Michael Crowley, admin. Alfred Music, used with permission.

Bowling's interpretation, she is clearly locked into a steady sixteenth-note pulse. By contrast, Scott Murray's fingerstyle arrangement is less focused on accurately replicating any one performance. Instead, he distills the basic musical information of the piece into a transcription that still passes as the work. Yet Murray, like Bowling, also simplifies the rhythmic articulation by maintaining a clear, steady pulse without the problematic added or dropped beats.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, I contacted Murray, who had offered his guitar notation or tablature to viewers of his video. He graciously provided it, but cautioned me in a July 22, 2021, email that "The musical notation was created automatically as I entered the tab ... I'm not sure how accurate it is." Examination confirmed that the tablature does have several inaccuracies (deviations or variations) from how it was performed by Weir and the Dead. Furthermore, the score is written using the eighth note as the underlying pulse, which is somewhat inhospitable to guitarists with a classical background—the bulk of classical guitar literature is written using an underlying pulse at the sixteenth-note level. This choice has major implications for how the performing musician feels the music, which prompted my decision to reformat it.

While I initially thought the process of transcribing and reformatting Murray's notation would be a relatively straightforward task—simply copying his text into a notation software program and adding fingerings—detailed comparison of his text to primary source materials made clear the need for a new transcription derived from the primary sources. Not only would a new version help correct the record, it could also provide a starting point that approaches an accurate text. Creating a text would also be a teachable moment for the many guitarists on sites like [rukind.com](http://rukind.com) interested in learning the piece.

### **Creating the Text**

Before mapping the granular details of how Weir performs "Sage and Spirit," I needed to chart out the formal layout, also known as the road-map. Listening for formal aspects of the three versions by the Dead revealed a number of variations between performances. The two early versions were slightly longer, with extra measures that Weir elided in

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Sage and Spirit," Part 2, by Robert Weir. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of seven staves of music, numbered 30 through 60. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. Measure 30 begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. Measure 35 continues the melodic line. Measure 40 includes a triplet of eighth notes and a change in the time signature to 3/4. Measure 45 shows a change in the time signature to 2/4. Measure 50 features a section marked with a Roman numeral 'I' and a dashed line above it. Measure 55 features a section marked with a Roman numeral 'II' and a dashed line above it, followed by a section marked with a Roman numeral 'IX' and a dashed line above it. Measure 60 concludes the excerpt with a final chord and a fermata over the final note.

**Figure 2.** "Sage and Spirit," Part 2, by Robert Weir, © Ice Nine Publishing, admin. by WC Music Corp. Arrangement by Michael Crowley, admin. Alfred Music, used with permission.



the Radio City performance. I decided to base my arrangement on this later shorter version, not only for aesthetic reasons but also as a way to document and preserve it, an archival consideration that the uncertainty and instability of the internet underscores. All three versions informed the transcription process, especially when dealing with the places in Weir's part that were unclear or difficult to discern. When one source was unclear, the equivalent spot in one of the other sources provided a reliable basis for the transcription. The video sources were especially helpful in determining which left-hand positions Weir used, and consequently revealed the logic of what I identified as Weir's exercise, following Scott Tennant's concept of proper left-hand stance as well as the use of a left-hand guide finger (Tennant 1995).

The entire task took approximately 100 hours over the course of several months; the final results are seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3. I published the arrangement using a self-publishing site called [arrangeme.com](http://arrangeme.com), owned by music publisher and distribution company Hal Leonard LLC. Although the rights to the Grateful Dead's catalog are currently administered by Warner Chappell Music, Hal Leonard LLC acts as an intermediary, helping arrangers obtain the proper licensing and overseeing the administration of royalties to rightsholders. For musicologists, publication on that platform is on par with a scholarly blog post: a work that falls outside the traditional formats of scholarly publications but nonetheless represents the standards, methods, and concepts found in prestigious publications commonly held in academic library collections. Since one of the goals of the project was to create a work that could be used for study and research, accessibility was critical, like an open educational resource. Part of the publishing agreement is that the arrangement will be marketed on one of Hal Leonard's partner sites, [sheetmusicplus.com](http://sheetmusicplus.com), for a modest price that allows appropriate royalties to be paid. While access is not completely open, it is as close to that ideal as possible while still respecting the rights of all stakeholders associated with the work.

### **Closing Thoughts**

As a framework for editing music, Grier's approach was designed with score-based classical music in mind. Using it for this project highlighted some of the challenges faced by musicians studying the Grateful

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Sage and Spirit," Part 3, by Robert Weir. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of seven staves of music, each beginning with a measure number: 65, 70, 75, 80, 86, 92, and 95. The music features a complex rhythmic structure with various note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several dynamic markings, including accents and a *rit...* (ritardando) marking above the staff starting at measure 95. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

**Figure 3.** "Sage and Spirit," Part 3, by Robert Weir, © Ice Nine Publishing, admin. by WC Music Corp. Arrangement by Michael Crowley, admin. Alfred Music, used with permission.

Dead with the same level of scrutiny typically accorded so-called serious music. Although an ideal scenario for those following Grier's method is access to extant unpublished manuscripts created by editors under the direction of the creator, along with in-depth interviews with the creators themselves and perhaps unpublished video sources, this project showed that scholars can still manage to create effective, accurate transcriptions with a far less extensive archive of sources.

However, the time and effort required to create a critically edited score—especially the transcription process—serves as a real deterrent, especially for those unfamiliar with the Dead's music. Yet the rewards are significant: not only does the process demonstrate the power, complexity, and achievement of the Dead's music, the results make clear the utility and need for these tools to fully explore and appreciate their music, especially on a scholarly level. As a field, Grateful Dead studies will benefit from a larger pool of critically edited transcriptions of the band's best work, which makes possible more rigorous and sophisticated analysis. Such texts truly "reveal the music," in Steve Schuster's words, letting listeners, musicians, and scholars better appreciate the caliber and ambition of the Dead's music. Most of all, these texts demonstrate one of the Dead's most fundamental tenets about music: that it is a collective creation, best shared.

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