I thought if I skipped it might help my nerves, but I'm actually having a paradoxical reaction to that, so that was a bad idea. (Laughter)

0:22Anyway, I was really delighted to receive the invitation to present to you some of my music and some of my work as a composer, presumably because it appeals to my well-known and abundant narcissism. (Laughter) And I'm not kidding, I just think we should just say that and move forward. (Laughter)

0:42So, but the thing is, a dilemma quickly arose, and that is that I'm really bored with music, and I'm really bored with the role of the composer, and so I decided to put that idea, boredom, as the focus of my presentation to you today. And I'm going to share my music with you, but I hope that I'm going to do so in a way that tells a story, tells a story about how I used boredom as a catalyst for creativity and invention, and how boredom actually forced me to change the fundamental question that I was asking in my discipline, and how boredom also, in a sense, pushed me towards taking on roles beyond the sort of most traditional, narrow definition of a composer.

1:21What I'd like to do today is to start with an excerpt of a piece of music at the piano. (Music) Okay, I wrote that. (Laughter) No, it's not — (Applause) Oh, why thank you. No, no, I didn't write that. In fact, that was a piece by Beethoven, and so I was not functioning as a composer. Just now I was functioning in the role of the interpreter, and there I am, interpreter. So, an interpreter of what? Of a piece of music, right? But we can ask the question, "But is it music?" And I say this rhetorically, because of course by just about any standard we would have to concede that this is, of course, a piece of music, but I put this here now because, just to set it in your brains for the moment, because we're going to return to this question. It's going to be a kind of a refrain as we go through the presentation.

2:16So here we have this piece of music by Beethoven, and my problem with it is, it's boring. I mean, you — I'm just like, a hush, huh -- It's like -- (Laughter) It's Beethoven, how can you say that? No, well, I don't know, it's very familiar to me. I had to practice it as a kid, and I'm really sick of it. So -- (Laughter) I would, so what I might like to try to do is to change it, to transform it in some ways, to personalize it, so I might take the opening, like this idea -- (Music) and then I might substitute -- (Music) and then I might improvise on that melody that goes forward from there -- (Music) (Music)

3:21So that might be the kind of thing -- Why thank you. (Applause) That would be the kind of thing that I would do, and it's not necessarily better than the Beethoven. In fact, I think it's not better than it. The thing is -- (Laughter) -- it's more interesting to me. It's less boring for me. I'm really leaning into me, because I, because I have to think about what decisions I'm going to make on the fly as that Beethoven text is running in time through my head and I'm trying to figure out what kinds of transformations I'm going to make to it. So this is an engaging enterprise for me, and I've really leaned into that first person pronoun thing there, and now my face appears twice, so I think we can agree that this is a fundamentally solipsistic enterprise. (Laughter) But it's an engaging one, and it's interesting to me for a while, but then I get bored with it, and by it, I actually mean, the piano, because it becomes, it's this familiar instrument, it's timbral range is actually pretty compressed, at least when you play on the keyboard, and if you're not doing things like listening to it after you've lit it on fire or something like that, you know. It gets a little bit boring, and so pretty soon I go through other instruments, they become familiar, and eventually I find myself designing and constructing my own instrument, and I brought one with me today, and I thought I would play a little bit on it for you so you can hear what it sounds like.

4:43(Music)

4:54You gotta have doorstops, that's important. (Laughter) I've got combs. They're the only combs that I own. (Music) They're all mounted on my instruments. (Laughter)

5:06(Music)

5:15I can actually do all sorts of things. I can play with a violin bow. I don't have to use the chopsticks. So we have this sound. (Music) And with a bank of live electronics, I can change the sounds radically. (Music) (Music) Like that, and like this. (Music) And so forth.

5:52So this gives you a little bit of an idea of the sound world of this instrument, which I think is quite interesting and it puts me in the role of the inventor, and the nice thing about — This instrument is called the Mouseketeer ... (Laughter) and the cool thing about it is I'm the world's greatest Mouseketeer player. (Laughter) Okay? (Applause) So in that regard, this is one of the things, this is one of the privileges of being, and here's another role, the inventor, and by the way, when I told you that I'm the world's greatest, if you're keeping score, we've had narcissism and solipsism and now a healthy dose of egocentricism. I know some of you are just, you know, bingo! Or, I don't know. (Laughter)

6:31Anyway, so this is also a really enjoyable role. I should concede also that I'm the world's worst Mouseketeer player, and it was this distinction that I was most worried about when I was on that prior side of the tenure divide. I'm glad I'm past that. We're not going to go into that. I'm crying on the inside. There are still scars.

6:50Anyway, but I guess my point is that all of these enterprises are engaging to me in their multiplicity, but as I've presented them to you today, they're actually solitary enterprises, and so pretty soon I want to commune with other people, and so I'm delighted that in fact I get to compose works for them. I get to write, sometimes for soloists and I get to work with one person, sometimes full orchestras, and I work with a lot of people, and this is probably the capacity, the role creatively for which I'm probably best known professionally. Now, some of my scores as a composer look like this, and others look like this,and some look like this, and I make all of these by hand, and it's really tedious. It takes a long, long time to make these scores, and right now I'm working on a piece that's 180 pages in length, and it's just a big chunk of my life, and I'm just pulling out hair. I have a lot of it, and that's a good thing I suppose. (Laughter)

7:43So this gets really boring and really tiresome for me, so after a while the process of notating is not only boring, but I actually want the notation to be more interesting, and so that's pushed me to do other projects like this one.

7:55This is an excerpt from a score called "The Metaphysics of Notation." The full score is 72 feet wide. It's a bunch of crazy pictographic notation. Let's zoom in on one section of it right here. You can see it's rather detailed. I do all of this with drafting templates, with straight edges, with French curves, and by freehand, and the 72 feet was actually split into 12 six-foot-wide panels that were installed around the Cantor Arts Center Museum lobby balcony, and it appeared for one year in the museum, and during that year, it was experienced as visual art most of the week, except, as you can see in these pictures,on Fridays, from noon til one, and only during that time, various performers came and interpreted these strange and undefined pictographic glyphs. (Laughter)

8:44Now this was a really exciting experience for me. It was gratifying musically, but I think the more important thing is it was exciting because I got to take on another role, especially given that it appeared in a museum, and that is as visual artist. (Laughter) We're going to fill up the whole thing, don't worry. (Laughter) I am multitudes. (Laughter)

9:03So one of the things is that, I mean, some people would say, like, "Oh, you're being a dilettante," and maybe that's true. I can understand how, I mean, because I don't have a pedigree in visual art and I don't have any training, but it's just something that I wanted to do as an extension of my composition,as an extension of a kind of creative impulse.

9:20I can understand the question, though. "But is it music?" I mean, there's not any traditional notation. I can also understand that sort of implicit criticism in this piece, "S-tog," which I made when I was living in Copenhagen. I took the Copenhagen subway map and I renamed all the stations to abstract musical provocations, and the players, who are synchronized with stopwatches, follow the timetables, which are listed in minutes past the hour.

9:41So this is a case of actually adapting something, or maybe stealing something, and then turning it into a musical notation.

9:49Another adaptation would be this piece. I took the idea of the wristwatch, and I turned it into a musical score. I made my own faces, and had a company fabricate them, and the players follow these scores.They follow the second hands, and as they pass over the various symbols, the players respond musically. Here's another example from another piece, and then its realization.

10:09So in these two capacities, I've been scavenger, in the sense of taking, like, the subway map, right, or thief maybe, and I've also been designer, in the case of making the wristwatches. And once again, this is, for me, interesting.

10:22Another role that I like to take on is that of the performance artist. Some of my pieces have these kind of weird theatric elements, and I often perform them. I want to show you a clip from a piece called "Echolalia." This is actually being performed by Brian McWhorter, who is an extraordinary performer.Let's watch a little bit of this, and please notice the instrumentation.

10:40(Music)

11:09Okay, I hear you were laughing nervously because you too could hear that the drill was a little bit sharp,the intonation was a little questionable. (Laughter) Let's watch just another clip.

11:17(Music)

11:27You can see the mayhem continues, and there's, you know, there were no clarinets and trumpets and flutes and violins. Here's a piece that has an even more unusual, more peculiar instrumentation.

11:37This is "Tlön," for three conductors and no players. (Laughter)

11:53This was based on the experience of actually watching two people having a virulent argument in sign language, which produced no decibels to speak of, but affectively, psychologically, was a very loud experience.

12:03So, yeah, I get it, with, like, the weird appliances and then the total absence of conventional instrumentsand this glut of conductors, people might, you know, wonder, yeah, "Is this music?"

12:16But let's move on to a piece where clearly I'm behaving myself, and that is my "Concerto for Orchestra." You're going to notice a lot of conventional instruments in this clip. (Music) (Music)

12:41This, in fact, is not the title of this piece. I was a bit mischievous. In fact, to make it more interesting, I put a space right in here, and this is the actual title of the piece. Let's continue with that same excerpt.(Music)

13:02It's better with a florist, right? (Laughter) (Music) Or at least it's less boring. Let's watch a couple more clips. (Music)

13:26So with all these theatric elements, this pushes me in another role, and that would be, possibly, the dramaturge. I was playing nice. I had to write the orchestra bits, right? Okay? But then there was this other stuff, right? There was the florist, and I can understand that, once again, we're putting pressure on the ontology of music as we know it conventionally, but let's look at one last piece today I'm going to share with you.

13:52This is going to be a piece called "Aphasia," and it's for hand gestures synchronized to sound, and this invites yet another role, and final one I'll share with you, which is that of the choreographer. And the score for the piece looks like this, and it instructs me, the performer, to make various hand gestures at very specific times synchronized with an audio tape, and that audio tape is made up exclusively of vocal samples. I recorded an awesome singer, and I took the sound of his voice in my computer, and I warped it in countless ways to come up with the soundtrack that you're about to hear. And I'll perform just an excerpt of "Aphasia" for you here. Okay? (Music) So that gives you a little taste of that piece. (Applause)

15:17Yeah, okay, that's kind of weird stuff. Is it music? Here's how I want to conclude. I've decided, ultimately, that this is the wrong question, that this is not the important question. The important question is, "Is it interesting?" And I follow this question, not worrying about "Is it music?" -- not worrying about the definition of the thing that I'm making. I allow my creativity to push me in directions that are simply interesting to me, and I don't worry about the likeness of the result to some notion, some paradigm, of what music composition is supposed to be, and that has actually urged me, in a sense, to take on a whole bunch of different roles, and so what I want you to think about is, to what extent might you change the fundamental question in your discipline, and, okay, I'm going to put one extra little footnote in here, because, like, I realized I mentioned some psychological defects earlier, and we also, along the way, had a fair amount of obsessive behavior, and there was some delusional behavior and things like that, and here I think we could say that this is an argument for self-loathing and a kind of schizophrenia,at least in the popular use of the term, and I really mean dissociative identity disorder, okay. (Laughter)Anyway, despite those perils, I would urge you to think about the possibility that you might take on rolesin your own work, whether they are neighboring or far-flung from your professional definition.

16:32And with that, I thank you very much. (Applause)

16:33(Applause)