Squiggly Lines (Anne Rhodes’ process section)

My first thought when approaching this project was that I am neither a typical music scholar, because my background and degrees are in performance, nor am I a typical librarian, because I have been an archivist of the “lone arranger” variety for my entire professional career. Rather than try to be something I’m not, I chose to prepare for this performance like I would any other. That is, more like a professional vocalist and experimental musician than like a researcher or librarian. From the outside, this could like very little in terms of conventional preparation. After all, I am an improviser, and graphic notation lends itself well to exploiting that skill without hours of research and rehearsal. In fact, I am drawing on my years of experience engaging with a variety of graphic notation systems. That experience is what I’m going to briefly talk about now.

My first encounter with graphic notation came in 2001, when I decided to depart from standard classical vocal repertoire and prepare my first recital of 20th-century music. I knew that John Cage was a composer I should learn about, so I took a copy of his Songbooks (Solos for Voice 3-92) out of the MIT music library and looked for a piece that would allow me to use my voice as an instrument and did not require any electronics or other accompaniment I wasn’t able to supply myself. I chose Solo for Voice 52 (Aria No. 2). For this piece, the singer is instructed to sing the words written, using the lines provided as contours where left-to-right represents time, and up and down represent pitch. Kind of like traditional notation. Which brings me to something my husband, the composer Carl Testa, likes to say:
“All notation is graphic notation.” Meaning, notes on a staff are not music. They are a visual representation of music. (The markings you can see are my own, and represent one of the other instructions Cage provides, which is to assign a type of vocalization to each number in the score.)

The following year, as a member of the Wesleyan Creative Music Ensemble, I performed Earle Brown’s December 1952, for which ensemble members received no guidelines for interpretation from the composer or the ensemble director.

Soon after that, as a member of Anthony Braxton’s Large Ensemble at Wesleyan, I was introduced to Braxton’s Language Music, a simple system of numbered graphic images designed to codify types of sounds to use as building blocks for improvisation. In contrast, Braxton’s Falling River Music leaves interpretation almost entirely up to the performer, with the sole guideline of “sound rather than pitch.” In working with these forms, it was especially beneficial to be interacting with the composer himself. Students had ample opportunity to receive clarification (albeit sometimes arcane) and demonstrations of the composer’s intent.

As a graduate student at Wesleyan, I took a performance-based graphic notation course taught by then-doctoral student Andrew Dewar. The course centered around Cardew’s Treatise, and included readings from the Treatise Handbook as well as other articles Tom and Chris have mentioned. Through that lens, we also
approached and discussed graphic works by other composers, including Guillermo Gregorio and Anestis Logothetis.

A few years later, my boss at Oral History of American Music gifted me with an out-of-print copy of Tom Johnson’s Imaginary Music, a book of visual puns based on traditional notation. It is up for discussion whether Johnson intended this as a coffee table book or sorts, or whether the pieces were actually meant to be performed.

My interested in graphic notation eventually took a turn towards composition. I began embroidering music one day in 2007 when I set out to do some free-hand embroidery. Though I have been sewing, knitting, and embroidering for most of my life, I have relied upon patterns for most of this work. This time I wanted to create something both personal and abstract. However, when I began to stitch, I found myself unable to access any compelling visual ideas. I decided to think of sonic elements to represent visually, as I had seen done in graphic scores. This made more sense, given that I am a musician and not a visual artist. When I had the final product, In Stitches, in hand, my intention was still to just hang it on the wall as an ornament. However, when the members of my recently-formed chamber trio saw it, they wanted to play it, and it eventually became the title track for our first studio album. Here are some other samples of my embroidered scores.
While all of this performance and compositional experience may not fit neatly into the generally-accepted definition of “scholarship,” I believe the IL Framework allows for these modes of learning, particularly in the “Scholarship as Conversation” section, which states that “Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.” This principle allows for the oral tradition and mentor/apprentice-type relationships typically found in music performance circles both within and outside the academy.