When I was born, my brother was five years old and just beginning violin lessons. Every week, from the age of 14 days, I listened to my brother play his weekly scales and exercises for his teacher. I became fascinated with sound.

I started to take cello lessons when I was five, and my teacher had me write notes in order to learn how to read music. I would bring in what I had written, and together we would explore how it translated into sound. The realization that through this secret code I could turn ideas into a real physical phenomenon was breathtaking.

Worlds that I had always wanted (and still want) to explore were reachable, and I was going to create them myself. When I was seven, I wrote my first piece of music—for solo cello, so I could play it myself. At age ten, I wrote my first piece for orchestra. It was one thing to play the notes I heard in my head; it was quite another to hear a hundred people playing them.
In June of 1924, British mountaineers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine climbed into the sky. Ascending toward the summit of the highest mountain on the planet, they disappeared into a cloud and never came back. The peak of Mount Everest is 29,029 feet above the sea, a height at which the world is more space than earth. The atmosphere is so thin that climbers need the assistance of an oxygen tank just to breathe.

When asked what reason there was to go, Mallory, who was the first to try for the peak, stated that the journey was of absolutely “no use,” and that “there is not the slightest prospect of gain whatsoever.”

I am drawn to Mallory’s story. After all, what I do is also of “no use.”

Growing up playing the cello and knowing musicians through youth orchestras, I came out of the tradition of classical music, but to say that I am a classical composer would be misleading. My music doesn’t sound like the music of Beethoven or Mozart or Bach. There may be similar landscapes, some common emotions, but there are hundreds of years of civilization between us. I live in a time and place shaped by the spectacle of American history, surrounded by American music that almost entirely postdates classical music. Considering all this and my innumerable idiosyncrasies, I can’t say I see the world much like anyone else at all, much less people so far away through time and space.

Writing music is a very direct expression of my own life. My music sounds like the life I live. It sounds like I feel. Through music, I can express not just a momentary emotion, but a complex sequence of feelings through time. I can express the emotional trajectory of being alive.

I don’t have good enough eyes to be a pilot. I was born an age too late to be a cartographer who maps an unknown world. Now, of course, people have even seen the view from the top of Mount Everest. But I am an explorer.

To write music is to create my own worlds to explore. My piece Invisible Skyline is 27 minutes long, written for 37 lines played by about 75 musicians, and clocks in at an estimated 150,000 notes. But all those numbers only hint at something much larger. When everything is played in the right order at the right moment, an entire world emerges—a place where I’ve spent thousands of hours molding every strange vista, shaping gravities.

To write music is at once to experience the sheer joy of adventure and to share it. I want to allow other people to access those sounds and visions so fully and viscerally that space and distance collapse.

Expressing ideas and places through sound is a never-ending learning process. There is no key for the code. There are no chords that are sad and chords that are happy, no matter how many times people insist that major chords and minor chords bear those distinctions (the saddest music almost always consists of major chords, like Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings, or the Finale from Richard Wagner’s Götterdämmerung). Notes and chords only mean something in context, and that’s how composing becomes like mapmaking. You have to know where the edges are.

The longest piece of music I’ve written is about 36 minutes long and took about two years to write. For those keeping score, that’s a 29,200:1 ratio, or an average of about 20 days spent on each minute of the piece. There is time to get those moments right.

Imagine if you could plan every piece of speech in a conversation, every look in an interaction, listening over and over to everything you might say, mapping every possible outcome for as much time as you needed, before finally releasing the perfect instant into the world.

It is that opportunity—and the idea that every moment of my life could be such a masterpiece—that fills me with excitement. That is why I write music.

And yet, it’s true to some degree that what I do has very little use. My music will never help solve social inequalities, will never feed the hungry. I compose intricate works that until performed or recorded don’t have any physical existence at all, and the vast majority of people on this planet will never even hear my music. But that’s not why I do it.

“What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy,” George Mallory said.

When we think of Mallory, the first impulse is to think of the tragedy. Like Amelia Earhart lost at sea, he gave himself to the furthest limits of his imagination. I see great beauty in how Mallory pushed toward the outer limits of what he loved the most. He climbed in pursuit of joy. I can only hope to create such a work of art, to fashion every moment, through sound and breath, into a perfect exuberance.

A native of Berkeley, CA, Dylan Mattingly studies composition at the Bard College Conservatory of Music. His music has been performed in San Francisco, Sydney, Berlin, New York, London, and many other cities around the world. Dylan is the cofounder and an artistic director of Contemporaneous, a New York-based ensemble of young musicians, and performs frequently as a cellist, bassist, pianist, guitarist, and percussionist. He is also an avid painter, poet, and pitcher, having played for Bard College’s first ever baseball team.

Read more about Dylan Mattingly and his music at http://dylanmattingly.com.