MEGA

(Make Electroacoustic Great Again)

or

On the Importance of Play in Serious Music

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Bachelor's Thesis

Institute of Sonology

May 2023

Abstract

This thesis delves into the intriguing relationship between the concept of play and the creation of music. It examines the shared linguistic principle of the word *play* in various languages and its diverse applications across different activities, including music-making, sports, games, and theater. By drawing on philosophical, cultural, and artistic perspectives, the thesis explores the origins and significance of play in the human experience with the link to music and improvisation. The thesis examines improvisation as the primary mode of musical expression, allowing for spontaneous and playful exploration.

Central to the thesis is the recognition that play should not be seen as distinct from work. By rejecting the notion that play is non-serious, I contend that play requires complete attention and determination.

Based on specific examples of my own music and the process of design and choice of my instruments, this thesis emphasizes the importance of consciously integrating play into artistic practice, contextualizing musical performances, and recognizing the value of both the process and the outcome. Through a comprehensive analysis of play in the realm of music, this research aims to broaden our understanding of the multifaceted nature of play and its profound impact on musical expression.

Keywords: play, improvisation, performance, instrument building, contextualization, experiment, light, toys
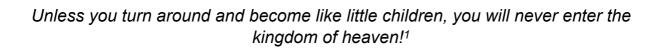
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Unless you turn around and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven![1]

Preamble

The Czech word *hrát*, Greek *paízo*, Yiddish *shpil*, Amharic *mech'aweti*, Chichewa *sewera*, Thai *lèn*, Zulu *dlala*, Dutch *spelen*, Latin *ludere*, English *play*…

Those are only a few of many examples of languages that share one specific relationship.[2] The multi-level homonymic principle of a word which describes the activity of *playing.* The fact that they all describe the activity of playing music, playing an instrument, playing sports, playing as a child does, playing games, playing in theaters…

This common denominator among these and many more languages should be at least striking if nothing else.

Why is that? Is it perhaps because there is some deeply rooted similarity, common space among all these activities being described with the use of a single verb? And is that similarity something worth paying attention to? And what could it offer to current musical practice to explore this phenomenon?

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[2] See Appendix #1

In the beginning was the Sound

The book of Genesis, one of the most influential pieces of literature in western world history, begins where else than in the beginning. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."[3] This beginning deliberately avoids the actual beginning as God and all the means to create are already implied to exist. John, many centuries later, in his testament, as well one of the most influential pieces of literature for the western world, makes a conscious allusion to the words of Moses by beginning his testament also in the very beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God."[4] In his approach, we can already see slightly different thinking, influenced by Aristotelian focus on what is it that allows for creation. He goes a semi-step further and suggests the tool for creation. In John's view, the tool is the Word. In our case, it is the word *play*.

I will take another semi-step back and begin at the beginning by stating that: In the beginning was the Sound. Any word in its "activated" form, (that is - not simply standing written somewhere) be it a word that is being said, being written, or read is existing first as a sound. Either an acoustic sound in space or an internal sound created inside one's brain. But let's reduce the full Word to only a syllable - ॐ (*om*).

In Bhagavad Gita, another one of the greatly influential pieces of literature, we read that the universe, although not strictly once created but rather circulating, anyhow is present through a sound:

> *The Blessed Lord spoke:*
> *Listen! I shall explain to you*
> *My divine self-manifestations;*
> *I am the beginning and the middle*
> *Of beings, and the end as well.*
> *Of words, I am the single syllable "Om";* [5]

I make the last and obvious stop by further reducing the sound from the syllable to a non-verbal type of sound, to that of the Big Bang. Although (in theory) not impressively loud, the inaudible long sound of the Big Bang nonetheless suggests yet another sonic link to the creation, a non-creationist one.

It is not different when it comes to my own musical creations. At the beginning of my musical endeavors is a sound. A deep and sometimes irrational fascination with sound in different forms, quite often in forms previously unknown to me, one could say *new*. The same fascination is present when it comes to sounds already existing, those which I merely hear, sounds of nature, other people, or all the other possible sources (and sometimes I also work with such sounds). Yet sounds, which I will mostly focus on here, are sounds that I *create* myself. I, as a product of the universe,

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[3] Gen. 1:1 (New Standard Version)

[4] Jhn. 1:1 (New Standard Version)

[5] Christopher Key Chapple. 2010. *The Bhagavad Gita.* State University of New York Press. 429-435.

(however that one came to existence), am nonetheless already an existent part of it, yet with the possibility to further create. A type of demiurge[6] if you will, with the power to create a small temporary sonic universe through the means of sound and for sound to exist in.

It is of course impossible to take ownership of a sound or to claim that I am responsible for the existence of a certain sound, but for the sake of understanding, I mean and will limit this to sounds that I deliberately bring to life, allow to exist, fulfill the means for them to appear. This point of view is quite important for my work, it suggests an approach to sounds as sovereign entities, that I simply discover or call into existence through my instruments/objects and work with them afterward. I do not rule them, I work *with* them. I like to think of my live musical setups often as an orchestra of individuals, which I am conducting and also embracing the dynamic non-totalitarian relationship with them. This dynamic is also responsible for the choices of instruments in my live performances, or the design choices in the instruments which I create. I will focus on this in detail later on.

My musical practice takes on many different forms and shapes, uses different means to exist. I wouldn't suggest that I have a specific style of my own, however I do observe that as a golden thread throughout most of my work, a certain type of playfulness is always present. I use different playful strategies, which I will describe in detail below, in order to deliver in an approachable and relatable manner my aesthetic, musical, conceptual, and/or philosophical works to an undefined audience. Because after the deep fascination with the sounds comes an equally irrational and equally as large urge to share them. To allow others to hear the interesting sonic spaces which I happened to create. And this is where the playful strategies for delivering and contextualizing come in to play. Over time I realized that (arguably always, but at least always in my case) music requires attention to the rather broad context, in which it is being presented. When attentively working with the context, one can potentially strengthen the delivery of the music and broaden its meaning. It seems rather obvious, perhaps redundant to mention, since the world of pop/dance music has understood this a long time ago with its pompous shows full of lighting effects, smoke, dance choreography, special outfits, fireworks, confetti, audience interactions, video projections, you name it… However, I often find it being overlooked in the field of the academic/electroacoustic/contemporary/experimental electronic scene which I mostly find myself in. By no means do I want to suggest that everyone should give in to pompous shows or make music nothing but a spectacle. I merely find it important to work consciously and attentively with the context. To know why and whether or not to use these mentioned strategies. This becomes even more important when it comes to acousmatic music, which gives the listener often nothing but the sound to lean on.

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6 "In the Platonic school of thought, demiurge is an artisan-like figure responsible for fashioning and maintaining the physical universe. Although a fashioner, the demiurge is not necessarily the same as the creator figure in the monotheistic sense, because the demiurge itself and the material from which the demiurge fashions the universe are both considered consequences of something else." "Demiurge." 2021. Wikipedia. December 1, 2021.

What is play?

"*Play* is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for humans to teach them their playing."[7], Johan Huizinga says in the very beginning of *Homo Ludens*, his treatise on *play*.[8] To understand play in this manner, that is, to presuppose the existence of play prior to the existence of humans, let me briefly and playfully refer to my introduction. In the book of Genesis, God has created animals with all their characteristics, i.e., also with all their playfulness, on the fourth and fifth day, *but* prior to creating human. Since creationism is by no means the topic of this research, let me finally divert from it through this induction; while we can spend our lives disputing over the existence of God, play is anyway not a human construct, it is thus impossible to deny. Yet, within play, we necessarily get to know our psyché (or spirit), for play goes beyond beyond the materialistic and rational levels of existence:

> "Since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind. (…)
> In acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter. Even in the animal world it bursts the bounds of the physically existent. From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is *irrational*."[9]

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[7] Huizinga, Johan. 1980. *Homo Ludens a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1.

[8] The intention is not to strike a polemic about what culture means, whether or not it is a concept applicable to humans only, that's another discussion. The word "culture" could be interchanged here with "human culture" or with direct "play is older than human society".

[9] Ibid., 3-4.

Definitions of play

I believe that, in the Chomskyan sense, language and careful choice of words play a detrimental role in shaping and understanding reality. As well as John's testament gives the utmost importance to the Word, let's focus on some specific keywords here. Let me first bring up the simple dictionary definitions of *play*.

The first definition of playing that The Oxford Dictionary offers is the following:
"To do things for pleasure, as children do; to enjoy yourself, rather than *work*."[10]
The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers this definition:
"A recreational activity, especially the spontaneous activity of children with the absence of *serious* or harmful intent."[11]

I find both of these definitions not only problematic but strictly wrong. Let me explain why.

Is play work?

"…to enjoy yourself, rather than work."

Claiming that play is something enjoyable, thus different from work, not only suggests that work shouldn't or can't be enjoyable, but it also says that play is absent in work and work is absent in play. That is simply incorrect. Every professional athlete would immediately disagree since they work hard on training to fulfill often a simple task to play a certain game, and their work in its essence is not different from the work of a lawyer or a surgeon. Artists, in our context musicians, those who daily engage with the activity of playing (music, an instrument, composing - playing with sounds,…) fit within this category. Every professional artist would have to admit that they are *working* when *playing*! If it's one's profession, it is their *work*. Should that mean then that it can not be enjoyable? I dare to suggest the opposite, that by allowing joy to escape from a playful activity, it stops being playful. Does it then mean that athletes' and artists' work is not playing? No, because then the word *play* would be left as an emptied-out concept, or only relating to children and animals. This definition becomes especially important in the discourse of cultural politics. It is essential to on the one hand embrace *play* and include it in artistic practice, on the other, artists need to have their activity recognized as *work* in order to be paid fairly for what they do. Thus these two concepts can not remain standing in opposition to each other.

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[10] Play_1 Verb - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com.

[11] "Definition of PLAY." n.d. Www.merriam-Webster.com.

Is play serious?

"…activity of children with the absence of serious intent."

This Merriam-Webster definition reminds us that *play* is often mistaken for a synonym for *non-seriousness*. Why is it a mistake?

> "To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. (…) The contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed. We can say: play is non-seriousness. (…) As soon as we proceed from "play is non-seriousness" to "play is not serious", the contrast leaves us in the lurch, for some play can be very serious indeed. Moreover, we can immediately name several other fundamental categories that likewise come under the heading "non-seriousness" yet have no correspondence whatever with "play". Laughter, for instance, is in a sense the opposite of seriousness without being absolutely bound up with play. Children's games, football, and chess are played in profound seriousness; the players have not the slightest inclination to laugh."[12]

Let's briefly define what *seriousness* is, or rather let me explain which of the multiple possible definitions of this broad concept I have in mind when relating it to musical practice and play. Such as this one definition from the Cambridge Dictionary[13], which says that to be serious is to be "determined to follow a particular plan of action" and that something which is serious is "needing or deserving your complete attention". I do not mean for example seriousness in sense of "severe or bad in effect" or "not intended to be funny". Now, why is it problematic to mistake play for non-serious behavior? Simply because playing does require one's complete attention and determination. I do sometimes come across and confront a kind of fear, which suggests that if we would take seriously something as free and enjoyable as play is, the seriousness could steal all the joy from the activity. Or on the other hand, in a compensating effort, which often can lead to over-correcting, we have been known to take the joyous endeavor of playing *too* seriously and overly rationally. It is perhaps through our own fear of coming across as childish and losing a sense of self-importance when engaging with tasks in a playful manner, that in the effort of appearing serious, we can make it boring, bureaucratic, and dull. However, that is again caused by misinterpreting what seriousness is. The solution could be to see the couple: seriousness-playfulness, not as a demon nor as antithesis, but once more as useful means that allows for creation.
There are a lot of people who dedicate all of their lives to training and working to fulfill an objective - *a goal*. It is not a coincidence, that we use the same word for fulfilling

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12 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 5-6.

13 Cambridge Dictionary. 2019. "SERIOUS | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary." Cambridge.org. 2019.

the objective of any task and also scoring in a game of e.g. football. Although it is important to mention that play is not necessarily only a *goal-oriented* or product-oriented activity. We understand that the value of playing football is in the process of doing it (and such is the case for music as well; the purpose of music is to be continuously played and heard) but anyhow the *goal* of playing football is to score *a goal*. This desired linguistic tautology points out one of the important actual properties of playing. The attraction of play is in its self-imposed challenges. An objective of a game is defined and given by the game's rules only. It has little to no correspondence whatsoever with the outer world, and only in that way is it possible to exist within all its joy. The purpose of such activity (if our focus is not on the profit-oriented business aspect) is not only for the players to engage fully with fulfilling their objective, but also for the audience to observe, perceive them trying, get immersed, identify with the performer of their choice, and judge how well they are doing their job. We know from experience how deeply and truly emotional and engaged the crowd can get when experiencing this *thing*, which is sometimes easily disregarded as silly or redundant, seen as superficial, or just extra. This deep emotional engagement is only possible when we willingly dive into the artificially created universe of rules and possibilities of a certain play. If we allow ourselves to doubt what is the purpose of such behavior, in what way can it directly affect and benefit society, the world, or oneself, then we are actually defying its purpose, for we are denying the magical environment, created by simply engaging with a given playful task in its full seriousness. So in other words, play only exists if we allow ourselves to take it seriously. Moreover, seriousness and playfulness should be going hand in hand to allow for the desired process and outcome.

Other related concepts

Safe space

One previously mentioned aspect of play worth making an analogy to music is that of *safe space*. It is in some form mentioned perhaps in all definitions of play, for it is self-evident and undisputable that play exists only in an environment lacking existential threats. What could that mean in musical scenarios? When it comes to for example performing music live, most people experience some form of fight, flight, or freeze effect in regards to the stress, nervousness, and anxiety which can come with exposing self to an audience. Such a reflex is a coping mechanism of the brain signaling that there is some threat present. Rational explaining then has to come into play, convincing oneself that the space is indeed safe, contrary to what one's body might be experiencing. This suggests somewhat of a philosophical approach to what *safe space* actually is. Namely that in many situations a safe space is not given, or cannot be given, but one has to decide and convince themselves of it. A safe space is not a space with the absence of critique or without the potential for failure, but rather the opposite. It is a space where one feels safe enough to criticize and be criticized, to express anything, try, experiment, and potentially even *fail*. Such attitudes are in my view paramount to cultivate in musical practice that aims not to be bound up by established musical conventions. To accomplish such a task of self-convincing, intentionally activated playful attitudes can help create a desired safe atmosphere, because the feeling of safe space is neurologically linked to play and can thus be triggered in this way. An early example of *safe space* constructed in order to bring criticism and open important conversations with a playful demeanor can be seen in the medieval concept of the *jester's immunity.* These playful fools had the privilege to tell the monarch things otherwise difficult or unacceptable, in some cases even openly mocking the ruler, without facing punishment.[14]

Kalokagathia

The similarity between sports and arts, or rather the importance of the existence of both in a life of an individual, can be further solidified with the classical Greek concept of *kalokagathia* - derived from the ancient Greek words *kalos* (beautiful) and *agathos* (virtuous). Even though this concept was applied more in the military or gentlemanly context, as to what a good soldier and citizen consist of, in its theory it stretches and can be applied to all of life, and not only that of humans but also animals or even inanimate objects. Kalokagathia suggests that there shall be a balanced harmonious interaction of a healthy and able physical, spiritual, and social/moral body. The physical is exercised through playing sports, the psychological

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[14] Although scarce, there are actual historic mentions of this behavior happening. Anyhow it later became a popular motive of historical novelists, who have further romanticized the concept to unrealistic amounts.

through arts, song, and poetry, and the social through rhetorics and laconism, training the ability of concise and meaningful verbalization.[15] Again, it is through play that all these three strata (believed to be essential for balanced life) intersect — playing sports/games, playing music, and playing with words. To say the least, it is, in my opinion, rather unfortunate how the domains of arts and sports have separated over time in the Western world, and especially at the professional levels are so rarely related.

Play as (more than) an evolutionary tool

To analyze other important aspects of play, let's imagine two kittens fighting playfully. We can understand that the purpose of their playful behavior is more than a mere game, but is rather an important part of their ontogenetic evolution. Through play within a *safe environment*, they are able to learn and train essential skills which will prove crucial in their future lives. Such an outcome is achievable only within a reciprocal relationship, for there has to be something or someone to play with, to play for, or to play against.

This becomes interesting when the analogy to music is taken up again. There are possible scenarios in which one plays music *with, for,* and *against* something all at the same time. *With* something or someone - an instrument, object, voice, radio, a fellow musician. *For* someone - the audience. And playing *against* something could be seen in a somewhat poetic sense, as playing against the ambiance, against the absence of music or sound, against the emptiness of a space, filling up the space with sounds and wrinkling the fabric of time.

The other issue I want to focus on in the kitten example is that of the evolutionary benefit. While the beneficial ontogenetic effect is undisputable, it is by no means the only or main value of play among living creatures. Play is not a mere biological tool or a utilitarian weapon of nature.

> "The numerous attempts to define the biological function of play show a striking variation. By some, the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some 'imitative instinct', or again as simply a 'need' for relaxation. According to one theory play constitutes a training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on. According to another, it serves as an exercise in restraint, needful to the individual. Some find the principle of play in an innate urge to exercise a certain faculty, or in the desire to dominate or compete. Yet others regard it as an outlet for harmful impulses, as the necessary restorer of energy wasted by one-sided activity, as 'wish-fulfillment', as a fiction designed to keep up the feeling of personal value,

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[15] "Kalos Kagathos." 2020. Wikipedia. October 19, 2020.

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etc. Most of them only deal incidentally with the question of what play is in itself and what it means for the player. They attack play direct with the quantitative methods of science without first paying attention to its *profoundly aesthetic quality*. As a rule, they leave the primary quality of play as such, virtually untouched."[16]

The aim is not to neglect these mentioned scientific explanations but to point out that by themselves are insufficient and concerned only with the serviceable utilitarian layer, which play in its complexity transcends. It is the *profoundly aesthetic quality* that I want to focus on. Without which it would be difficult to understand and explain why is play so captivating if play would exist only for the mentioned evolutionary benefits.

There is a lot more to be expanded on about play, many more definitions (pedagogical, psychological, biological, philosophical, poetic,…), further aspects of play (ritualistic, ceremonial, political, competitive, economic,…), and more. I need to draw the line somewhere, so I will not go in-depth into these. Let's instead now shift our focus fully on the musical aspect of playing. Let's look at the primary quality of play, that of a profound aesthetic value, through a lens where it becomes perhaps the most apparent — *playing music*.

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[16] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 2.

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Are you not convinced that all that arises is from the playfulness and courage of these people running about, who, making neither books nor useful things, have time enough to babble like a god and arrange things in a surprising sequence?

The measure of distance is wandering, the measure of plenty is hunger, and play precedes action.[17]

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[17] Vančura, Vladislav. 2016. *Summer of Caprice*. Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press. 37-38.

Playing (in) music

Outset

In the introduction, I have hinted at the modus operandi of my musical practice, how things unfold and develop from and around sound, which is the focal point of my work, an omnipresent entity from which everything grows and into which everything enfolds.

In its most abstract sense, sound within my work serves a multitude of functions. If we decide to see it as one encompassing entity and not as an assemblage of separate solitary sounds, we can then notice that it creates a background for itself to be in the foreground of, at the same time. *Causa sui*[18] of sorts. If the concert environment prior to a performance is absenting sound, then any sound that begins to be created becomes immediately the focal point of the current soundscape, while also comes to be a potential backdrop for new sounds to exist in. It functions as fertile ground for new sounds to emerge from. A kind of universe consisting of a matter of sound. In order for the universe to keep existing, it has to stay in motion, develop and evolve, expand and shrink. New elements are created while others may cease to exist. For this to be possible, there has to be some source of energy. That energy comes through the performer, who is in the middle of this reciprocal circulating feeding back complex totality, *playing* with, for, and upon it.
The sources of such mentioned energy I sometimes find even in non-sounding originators, which further broaden the context of the musical event (such as light sources, body movement, and more, further elaborated below).

I will now describe my musical habitude through specific examples of methods and processes present in my artwork. Although my artistic practice spreads over a wider territory,[19] so not all the bellow mentioned aspects are always present in all my creations.

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[18] "*Causa sui* (transl. cause of itself, self-caused) is a Latin term that denotes something that is generated within itself." "Causa Sui." 2023. Wikipedia. March 17, 2023.

[19] E.g. sound installations, fixed-media compositions as well as compositions for other performers, poetry and literature, opera, performance art, pop music, dance music,…

Improvisation

Live improvised performance is my main and most frequent musical activity. For many years I have been performing under the pseudonym Tišek Ruška[20] or with an open collective ensemble Tomatoes from Yesterday[21]. Over the years, the form of the performance and set of my instruments have been constantly changing and will continue to do so, which is an essential part of my composing and artistic development. Although improvisation is not the only form of my musical expression, it is perhaps the one most natural to me, because it allows or even suggests a playful demeanor. Improvisation in essence is to me a playground, an activity perhaps not so different from the one which a child does, having a multitude of toys in their possession and playing with them through immediate choice-making. It is no coincidence that plenty of my musical instruments are hacked *toys*. But more about that later. As far as improvisation is concerned, let me explain (or rather omit the explanation) with the words of Derek Bailey, one of the most renowned improvisers of the last century:

> "Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic."[22]

On a similar note, Tracy McMullen says that: "Improvisation underscores impermanence, intersubjectivity, and corporeality, and therefore is a radical departure from enlightenment thought that favors permanence, the self-contained individual, and 'objective truth'."[23] Talking about improvisation is a lot like talking about music itself — paradoxical. It is an attempt to capture something fundamentally abstract and elusive with language made of words — solid concepts and definitions. Such effort could be successfully achieved maybe only through poetry[24], which *is* a paradoxical practice, since it's in pursuit of describing and creating the un-known and un-knowable, the un-owned and un-ownable, and tries to perhaps even un-learn the already-learned. All that in an effort to allow distancing a concept from its meaning and that way to offer a new version.[25] Version comes from Latin *versum* — meaning to turn, change, overthrow as well as *a verse*, i.e., the building block of poetry! Yet all of that happens antithetically through words — through its own *body*. Such is also the

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[20] Tišek Ruška is a shortened version of my name, while simultaneously being a play on words in Czech language, Tišek meaning "the one who silences", Ruška being "the one who makes rustle or noise".

[21] Tomatoes from Yesterday is an ensemble with changing personnel, as long as either I or Ghaith Qoutainy are present.

[22] Bailey, Derek. 1993. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music.* New York: Da Capo Press. 9.

[23] McMullen, Tracy. 2010. *Subject, Object, Improv: John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and Eastern (Western) Philosophy in Music. Critical Studies in Improvisation* / Études critiques en improvisation. 6.

[24] Along with music I equally as much focus on poetry and writing poetry, so poetic principles and approaches influence my music making. Poetry appears in my music often indirectly, but sometimes even directly in the word forms.

[25] Such an approach is also in my view *beautiful,* for I would argue that *beauty* happens when we violate our preconceptions of things.

case when I create *environment of sound* which allows for other sound to exist within itself.

Furthermore, the element of *body* is in my view an essential part of improvising. Arguably every form of improvisation requires the direct immediate presence of the performer/improviser. Improvisation cannot be done ahead, nor ex post. The improviser's *body* is necessary in real time for an event to happen, for both an action and its reaction. This embodiment of music brings forward an interesting outlook on improvisation, perhaps best covered with the words of Pauline Oliveros:

> "People are becoming more and more distant from physical experiences of music-making. It seems as if mind-body dualisms have created a false distance between the physicality of music and its equally crucial cognitive components."[26]

In my practice, I equally welcome both the physical body and the "cognitive body" which I will here call the ego. The ego has to be present for its cognitive abilities, decision-making, giving commands, and the effort to deliver my message, to sculpt my ideas with sound. While perhaps ego somewhat dissolves in the moment — I am not necessarily thinking "I" while performing — it still in some form exists. My music is not about me, but I, the performer, have to be there in order to make sounds happen, and to let sounds be sounds as independent sovereign entities.

I consider interesting the approach of John Cage who has also been very much concerned about the independence of sounds in relation to the presence of his ego in his music, but rather from a radically opposing perspective:
"To 'let sounds be themselves,' to allow sound and the senses to predominate over the mind and its choices. According to David Nicholls, 'Cage's ultimate and unprecedented goal [. . . was that of] 'giving up control so that sounds can be sounds'"[27] while at the same time, Cage was often in opposition to both improvisation and bodily physicality in music. Instead, he developed his indeterminacy methods and chance operations as (in his own words) a "means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience whether that be outside or inside. (…) By flipping coins to determine facets of my music, I chain my ego so that it cannot possibly affect it."[28] While I consider improvisation as a practice allowing for the rare moment of semi-dissolution of ego by *freeing* it completely through the physicality of the sensuous bodily experience, for Cage, who was not an improviser, it was rather through *chaining* it in order for it not to interfere with the desired (musical) freedom.

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Revill, David. 2014. *The Roaring Silence*. Simon and Schuster. 318.

As for the physical body, I invite it to play more than a role of a simple tool to execute functions. Instead, via the use of motion sensors, gyroscopes, and light sensors, I give the body and its movements a crucial role in producing the sounds. However, I do not approach it as dancing, as it is not choreographed and the aesthetics of the movement are not the focus. The function of the movement is rather to bridge the previously described growing gap of mind-body dualism in electroacoustic music. To allow for the body to be a part of the music. Even more so when the movement is automatic, unconscious, or even accidental. From the moment I move my body to do a certain action, having lights and sensors attached to my body, other events will also happen coincidentally. These coincidentals are of course an *intentional* part of the design and choice of instruments. This hints at another reason why I chose to do things this way, as in this way I am able to control many more parameters of the instruments at a single moment, since otherwise, I would have only two hands for control.

The immediate bridge between body and ego in improvisation I see happening through *listening*. As listening is a process that happens through the combination of the physical organ and the cognitive organ. "Improvisation privileges listening and responding and therefore highlights intersubjectivity—the ways our actions and sense of self are constantly constructed through interaction with our environment."[29]

Last but not least, improvisation in my case does not happen merely on the stage. It follows the entirety of my musical production. From the very beginning when I am choosing and creating my instruments. When I go strolling in second-hand stores or scroll through websites looking for future musical instruments, I often don't have a specific object or a goal in mind. It is again through the immediate choice-making based on the plethora of received inputs, that something catches my eye enough for me to engage with it. Sometimes I don't even have a specific use for the object in mind when I'm buying it, and so the objects may be laying around for a long time until I find or make them a place in my musical set. Mostly I hack the objects and tinker with them in various ways to make them into the instruments. This tinkering process is a dominant compositional strategy of mine and it is often purely improvisational and experimental — "what happens if…". This is even more present when I create my instruments from scratch. I always begin with a clear idea of what I would like to achieve and build, what sorts of functions and meaning should the instrument have, but I always leave myself enough space to be able to improvise along the way. Which most often results in the being somewhat different from the original plan. "Improvisation is a practice where actions and responses are not enforced, but also do not arise completely independently. Much like daily life, musical improvisation is a complex system of interaction, negotiation, and co-arising."[30] In this way, it is fully present in the acquiring, choosing, designing, creating, and contextualizing of my instruments, as well as in playing with them. I will talk more about my specific instruments in the next chapter, let me close this one off with the words of the great improviser John Zorn:

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[29] McMullen, Tracy. 2010. *Subject, Object, Improv.*

[30] Ibid.

"[Improvisation is where…] people blossom and become the assholes that they really are."[31]

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[31] Marre, Jeremy, dir. 1992. *On the Edge: Improvisation in Music*, DVD. Jeremy Marre.

The design and choice of instruments

My live acts are constant in the tendency to constantly change. One specific aspect which allows and encourages the change is the multiplicity of instruments I use. The benefit of this conglomeration of separate standalone sound sources is the modularity, which allows to change, replace, and adjust easily. It challenges me to constantly think of and create new instruments to add to this ever-changing dynamic entity, which identifies my live sets. Instead of having a single robust system to play with, I have something more similar to an orchestra or an ensemble. Sometimes it happens that a certain instrument that I have set up on the stage is not used at all during the show. Almost always a different alignment of instruments is used.
It used to be only a number of acoustic and analog-electronic instruments. Recently I introduced digital sound sources via a computer as well, in a limited manner. Yet the attention to acoustic and analog sound is still very much dominant.

Aesthetics, symbolism, and functionality

There is a number of important attributes that I focus on when choosing and designing an instrument. I will describe the three most essential ones here:

First and foremost it is their sound quality, as sound is the main element that I want to deliver and through which I want to deliver. The rest could be seen either as strategies on how to deliver it the way I want to, or as ways allowing for the performability and functionality, or as essential and influential context, or simply as an integral part of an object. An object has to interest me sonically first, only then do I begin looking for ways of integrating it into my live music. The way I decide whether a certain sound is interesting happens to a large extent intuitively. There is no "catalog" or a library of sounds from which I would choose nor is there any determinating factor or a rule to which I would stick. There are however many factors and criteria influencing my compositional decisions. Those I either talk about in the following specific examples or I leave them in the realm of intuition. Intuition, according to Professor Andrea Evers, researcher of the predictive brain at Leiden University, is a decision-making apparatus that combines a large amount of information, experience, and emotions gathered throughout all of one's life and produces a decision based upon that. That happens subconsciously because then we are able to make a decision in much larger complexity, as opposed to working only with the rational. She says that:

> "There is an old-fashioned contradiction between art and science, between body and mind. But I think that's a conservative way of thinking, which stems from the desire to understand everything rationally. As if what we don't understand rationally doesn't exist. But there is implicit knowledge that we cannot yet comprehend with our brain.

It [is] necessary to use intuition more often, because we cannot comprehend the continuous flow of information with our rational knowledge alone."[32]

The activity of play happens to a large extent on the intuitive layer, as well as improvisation with its requirement for immediate-input-based reactions. Such is also the case in my compositional process and judgments about sounds. I know well whether I like a certain sound or not, and whether it fits my musical narrative or not. However, to know why that is the case is rather a difficult question, perhaps even impossible to answer. Most importantly it is to me a question fairly uninteresting. There are simply too many connotations, reasons, and context when the intuitive is making a choice, and as stated above, by definition it's subconscious and non-rational. Moreover, I find it crucial for this layer of intuitive composing to exist in music and to willingly invite it and look for it.

My focus is less on individual sounds that stand alone as a protagonist, but on their position as part of the complex network and on creating relationships with each other, branching outside of the only sonic and musical realm. The experimental music scene in Czechia (where I come from) is not so much divided into different genres, but often a conglomerate of all of them together. It is not uncommon to come across an event where e.g. contemporary orchestral music is being performed right after a harsh noise performance, followed by some ambient drone music. Growing up and being active in that scene has shaped me in such a way that I do not hesitate to combine things at first glance unrelated. Specifically by being active in the noise scene, I learned about other valuable aspects of music outside the colloquial idea of beauty, i.e. that the sounds sometimes want to be even unpleasant. I am however thoroughly fascinated with the quality of the specific sounds which I use. Yet my goal is perhaps to deliver the fascination of sound in general, instead only of the specific aesthetics that I produce. I view this fascination and passion as well as the concept of play as certain *activating* factors, for when that fascination is successfully transmitted, it can branch out; it doesn't have to remain in the same spot, perhaps it even shouldn't remain in the same spot, but can be used as lively energy elsewhere. This energy is what I want the audience to carry home with them. Thus I do not try to necessarily enforce my specific sound aesthetic on the audience; that aesthetic is mine, and it is all right if it remains mine. Rather I attempt to deliver and spread general *enthusiasm* about sound, as well as attitudes, approaches, and a certain kind of energy not strictly related to only sound. The concept of enthusiasm is of ancient Greek origin and describes someone who has been possessed by the divine.[33] I find that precisely adequate to what I sometimes personally experience with sound and music. I aim to spread what I believe in, and "possess" or "activate" others with it. Besides the sound universe, the other concept I want to deliver is the importance of play in everyday life, especially in that of an adult. Since these two things go hand in hand in my case, the play allows for sound and the sound allows for play, those two are mutually indispensable. I view play in my music as a mediating juncture. It's me

[32] "De Wetenschap van Het Buikgevoel, Of: Hoe We Meer Op Onze Intuïtie Kunnen Varen." 2022. De Volkskrant. September 19, 2022.

[33] "Enthusiasm." 2022. Wikipedia. November 5, 2022.

communicating with the "object" of play, which then branches out, spreads, and further communicates with the rest.

As for evaluating my own performance, I do that, but outside of the duality of success and non-success. I am not aiming to invent and develop a single final and finished setup that I would then reiterate in each performance. The process is, as I mentioned before, dynamic and never-ending. I constantly to some degree change my setup and approach in an experimental manner, thus it is not a linear evolutionary process that could be evaluated as being successful or not, or as getting closer to "the desired". It is a process of experimentation, and I consider experimentation successful if something new is being done and tested and if something is learned about it. Even if the testing "fails", I consider failure and especially openness to failure as an integral part of live improvisation. After a performance, I reflect and act because I understand that a certain element did not function well within the interconnected whole, so I perhaps leave it out next time or modify it, or change my approach to it. But again, this process happens to a considerable extent intuitively. Because it is in the form of a live improvised performance with an audience, I am also constantly receiving reactions from the observers, I read the atmosphere during the performance and I act upon it both on the spot and later on during the reflecting process.

Besides the sound, the next essential quality is symbolism. As I have briefly hinted in the introduction, I consider non-sonic context a crucial facet of music. I will further elaborate specifically on contextualizing in the following chapter, but a part of the context I will talk about here is the symbolism and the inherent characteristics of the objects, as it plays a significant role in my instrument choices. I look for objects with innate symbolism that fits my aesthetic narrative, and then I find ways to evoke and emphasize that symbolism. Although sometimes I do not further evoke or emphasize it. Sometimes I just "leave it be", to communicate its symbolic meaning on its own without my interpretations. Or I embed the characteristics when designing or hacking an instrument so that it communicates well with the rest of the instruments, with me, and with the audience. I further challenge and welcome this mutual communication by leaving the objects some "mind of their own", some independence, so that it's not only me having all the power over them, but so that I also have to react.

Along with the mentioned, there is the third important aspect — performability and functionality. The instruments need to be accessible enough for me to immediately and easily act upon them, which becomes increasingly difficult with the growing amount of sound sources. That has led to certain choices in the design so that I would be able to control them with more than my two hands. For that reason, I also create different feedback loops (Not of the acoustic type! See e.g. subchapters Disco helmet and Plasma lamp.) and relationships on different layers, so that the instruments influence each other, with me changing only a certain parameter of a single instrument.

These three essential aspects work together dynamically. Not vertically, nor horizontally, but in a triangle where each apex directly influences and is

simultaneously influenced by both others. In reality, it is of course much more complex and there are many more aspects that play a role.

I will now describe it on a number of specific examples of my instruments together with attached audiovisual samples.[34] There are other instruments, elements, and strategies in my performances that I have not included in this selection (some of which can be seen in the audio-visual examples). One more thing to mention is that all the sounds in the live performances are generated on the spot. There are no samples or other prerecorded sound sources.

Light-controlled synthesizer[35]

As the very first analog synthesizer that I built (2019), it proved to be extremely influential, and to this day I still use it quite often. The initial goal was to build a theremin, emphasizing the body movement in performance. But when researching on how to do that, I came across light-dependent resistors, which have sparked my interest even more, due to the way the movement is linked to the sound, yet with another new added element - light. That made me embark on a journey that I am still on. Once I finished the instrument, what followed after then were two years of covid with very limited opportunities to perform, so my first live performance with this instrument happened in March 2022 with Tristan Better[36]. The instrument consists of a single independent square wave oscillator with a HPF and two inter-dependent oscillators that ring modulate each other and are controlled by two separate LDR's or alternatively a single potentiometer. While experimenting with it, I noticed a desirable square-like modulation, which happens when a flashing light source is directly touching the LDR's. This results in periodic changes between very high and low frequencies, which under some settings can resemble an acid-like kick drum for a rhythmical element in my music. When experimenting with it, the only flashing light source I had at home were bike lights. Since then I kept using mostly the bike lights in my performances. Even though I could have easily created some controllable flashing light source, I was intrigued by the aforementioned necessity for me to work with the limitation and the inherent characteristic of some object, and also again for its symbolic quality. The bike lights already mean something; they are easily associated with their original utilitarian purpose. I take this utilitarian function of an object and give it a new one; an artistic function. And this uprooted situation which creates an immediate relation to the object's original environment through a different context is something that I am after. It creates further unexplained tension while also making it strangely relatable. In my own interpretation, I see the symbolism in yet another form of communication. A light on a bike communicates to the surrounding that there is someone whose presence is important to recognize. It is also directly

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[34] The majority of the examples are instruments that I use when performing as Tišek Ruška.

[35] See Appendix #2

[36] See Appendix #3

connected to movement, navigation, or guidance, both literally and metaphorically. I believe that it may also trigger a "beware" reflex, especially when blinking periodically, which can grab the attention of the audience. However, these are only my personal interpretations and I leave it open for the observer to interpret its significance. Such an approach is present in many of my instruments.

Ever since then, I have been working with light as a driving force in my music.

Rotary dial telephone synthesizer[37]

This (so far my most ambitious) analog synthesizer is a result of my long fascination with old rotary dial telephones. At the very beginning of my studies in Sonology, during one of my countless strolls through a second-hand store, I stumbled upon one of those phones and bought it. At that time I had not thought further than using only the microphone for its distinguishable sound and visual-symbolic quality. And so I have been using the microphone in my live shows.[38] But a few months later, while rehearsing John Cage's Songbooks with singer Noa Frenkel for a performance at the conservatoire, a couple of the "songs" required a rotary dial to control some sound parameters. I knew I had one at home, so I naively offered my help to make it functional. That sent me on a multiple-year journey of researching, acquiring, and working with these dials (I have a feeling that the journey is still not over). One day I have gotten my hands on this beautiful Czechoslovakian Tesla telephone from 1949 (model "K" [39]), and after consulting it with Nic Collins who has (thankfully) discouraged me from my initial idea to work with the actual "guts" of the phone, I have decided to build and put inside an analog synthesizer and use the rotary dial as an input controller. On Lex van den Broek's recommendation, I proceeded with the use of shift registers, which count the number of impulses coming from the mechanical dial and further decide which out of the 10 oscillators will be sending the signal out.[40] Each of these oscillators then has a separate potentiometer control for volume and a variable frequency. The frequency of most of the oscillators is controlled again via different LDR's, some have potentiometers and others have a slot for an external resistor of any kind, which I use mostly for the physical body resistance upon touching a simple wire with my hand. During the building and tinkering, I have parted from the originally simple idea of 10 separate oscillators, and by "mistake", I found an interesting way to connect them together which results in a semi-chaotic behavior, giving it a little bit of that "mind of its own".
My main interest in using the rotary dial as a control was in order to allow for a

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[37] See Appendix #4

[38] See Appendix #5

[39] See Appendix #6

[40] This process could be achieved much more simply with the use of a microcontroller for example, but I took it upon myself as a challenge to do this fully analog and by myself. And admittedly also due to a needlessly purist attitude that I used to have back then towards the analog, previously avoiding all that is digital in my live sets.

different, more performative and exciting way of playing a synthesizer, instead of simply turning potmeters and pushing buttons or keys. I used the body of the telephone for its undisputable symbolic (and aesthetic) quality. A telephone is something that one easily associates with communication, namely communication purely via sound and mostly the communication between two different people through this technology. But suddenly this nowadays obsolete communicating device is speaking for *itself* towards the audience via abstract electronic sounds and noises. I felt it was important that the sounds are purely analog, as it is originally an analog technology and any digital or otherwise processed sounds would create discrepancy, which could be perhaps interesting but not so much fitting my intentions with this instrument.

The latest addition to the synthesizer was in the form of a very old Tesla television remote control, that I found in my grandfather's workshop.[41] It consists simply of two high-value resistors on a very long cable which act as additional frequency modulators for multiple oscillators. The intention is to give this to the audience members during a performance, so they can play along with me. This further emphasizes the communication characteristic of the instrument, as the audience begins to directly communicate with the instrument, me, and the music. And at the same time it confuses the communication characteristic, since now the communication doesn't happen through the means usually associated with the object — speaking. But it happens through the abstaract resistance values which are translated into equally as abstract sounds.

Disco-helmet [42]

Both aforementioned instruments are controlled by light. The way I supply the light has changed over the years. Originally I did it via mentioned bike lights, which I later on put on my head to free up my hands.[43] That was only one step away from creating this standalone battery-powered light-emitting helmet. It was created purely from materials found in second-hand stores. It consists of an old bicycle helmet, a couple of bike lights, and other light sources. I have glued on the helmet lots of small mirrors for additional light reflection and for the appealing glamorous aesthetic, reminding a disco ball. One of the light sources is a flashing RGB bulb, which has an implanted microphone inside so that the temporal frequency of the flashing is decided by loud incoming impulses. During my show, it is often the case that the amount of sounds results in very irregular behavior. Since the sound instrument are controlled by light and one of the lights is controlled by sound, I create a feedback loop of reciprocal modulation. Lastly, the obvious purpose for having it in the form of a helmet is to allow unrestricted hand movement while also resulting in the desired unintentional variations due to my head movement required by other causes.

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[41] See Appendix #7

[42] See Appendix #8

[43] See Appendix #9

Plasma lamp [44]

One of the latest additions to my set. It has been my childhood wish to have one of these, but I never had. To compensate for my unfulfilled dream, I have acquired one and developed it into a musical instrument. This is perhaps one of the few examples where my original intention actually turned into the final product without changing much along the way.

Inside the lamp, I put a gyroscope and an accelerometer connected to a microcontroller. The received data is processed in Max and used as values for either vocoding or granular synthesis of two other sources of choice (often the two aforementioned synthesizers). This is so far the only digital sound processing that I work with in my live shows.[45] This requires me to have a laptop present, but I always have it hidden under the table, not interacting with it at all during the show. All the controls are delegated to the plasma lamp itself. The choice to introduce digital processing after working predominantly with analog sounds was to a large extent aesthetical. As the sonic world of analog electronics, especially of a DIY nature, is somewhat limited and sometimes even predictable, introducing even just one processing of digital sort can bring a broad expansion of sonic horizons. Besides, I do not "drown" everything in that processing, but I process only certain elements and only at certain times. That way it provides a contrasting function.

The lamp, similar to the lightbulb on my helmet, also has a choice of microphone mode that turns it on or off based on the incoming signal. During a performance, I pick up the lamp and move with it, turn it around, touch it — changing the shapes of the plasma filaments, etc. And overall I just *play* around with this alien-like attractive object, thus interacting with the sensors inside and affecting the sound. This object is again a device of both sound and light quality.

However, when rehearsing with it, I came across another use for it. I found out that the electromagnetic field produced by the device is of a very rich constantly fluctuating nature in the frequency domain, and outputs a full-bodied sonic result when picked up by an electromagnetic pickup.

To achieve greater fluctuation in the EM field, physical touch is required.

For that purpose, I have developed a golden glove with separate EM pickups on each finger which are then sent to separate channels. For that, I have used Jonáš Gruska's open-source elektrosluch circuit.

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[44] See Appendix #10

[45] I work much more with digital sources and processing in my other musical endeavors (fixed media compositions, installations, and others).

Toy gun [46]

First and foremost it is a toy, which makes the connection to play rather obvious. It consists of a children's toy gun which upon "shooting" produces flashing lights and simple sounds. It is circuit-bent in order to be able to change the frequency of both the sounds and the lights.[47] [48]

In the case of this instrument, its sonic abilities are fairly limited and it carries greater significance as a symbolic and performative element. For that, it has become an integral part of my live music acts, where I would on many occasions "shoot" the gun into the audience while having intense eye contact with specific people. Such moments would usually spark the often only moment of laughter among the crowd. So in the act, I use it highly sparsely and as a part of decompression after a more intense buildup of energy, or as a sort of catharsis. Humor is a concept with which I work consciously and attentively, and is often linked with a playful demeanor (although by no means essential). However, in my conception of humor, laughter is not always necessarily present. The type of humor that aims at the objective of laughter I would call comedy. Comedy in music is something with which I work very carefully or mostly avoid. However, humor is something I like to welcome. By humor, I mean here (purely in my own optics) a kind of displacement, strangeness, tension, weirdness, or something transcendental. By choice, I will not delve deeper into it here as I follow the famous words of E. B. White: "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process."[49]

There is one more element that this toy allows; communication with the audience. Although sparsely, I do bring up verbal communication with the audience. I talk to the telephone microphone. In few of my shows I began with the words of Johan Huizinga about play from the very beginning of Homo Ludens:

> "A happier age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of Homo Sapiens. In the course of time we have come to realize that we are not so reasonable after all as (…) we thought. (…) There is a (…) function, however, applicable to both human and animal life, and just as important as reasoning and making namely, playing. It seems to me that (…) perhaps on the same level as Homo Sapiens, Homo Ludens, Human the Player, deserves a place in our nomenclature."[50]

Other times I hand a walkie-talkie (for its distinguishable unpredictable noisy nature) to the audience and communicate with them directly,[51] or I communicate with other

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[46] See Appendix #11

[47] Circuit-bending is a process often present in my pursuit of music instruments.

[48] However, this instrument is not my own find, it has been given into my possession by the kind Kerim Kali.

[49] "A Quote by E.B. White." n.d. Www.goodreads.com. Accessed May 30, 2023.

[50] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* Foreword.

[51] See Appendix #12

performers when performing with Tomatoes from Yesterday.[52] In this performance, it was intended that we talk with each other while not understanding each other's languages. I was speaking in Czech while Tristan Beutter was speaking in Greek, but we spoke about the same topic we predetermined. The conceptual focus of this act was to hint at possible understanding despite the initial idea of miscommunication. In one of my recent performances with Kerim Kali, it even became the building block of the whole construction, where we have been communicating together throughout the whole performance through different means. At one point I even called an unsuspecting audience member on their cellphone.[53]

However, the communication this instrument brings is of the different kinds, non-verbal. The concept of communication is present in multiple places, for example through the symbolics of the telephone synthesizer and its microphone, or by handing in the remote control to the crowd. In the case of the gun, the crowd becomes the center of attention as the "victims" of my "shooting" which creates a dynamic that would simply not be possible without them. The audience becomes more than a passive receiver; it becomes an integral ingredient of the whole act. I view it as communicating directly to them through action, emphasizing the fact that my whole musical effort is about communicating through means other than verbal, mostly the sonic.

Amplified cactus [54]

As the title suggests, this instrument is simply a cactus with an attached contact microphone. I attach the microphone directly to the massive body of the plant, which is filled mostly with water, thus making for good resonance. Then I pluck the different spines of different lengths and thicknesses to produce sounds of different pitch, timbre, and sustain characteristics. The inspiration to use it in my music came from my lifelong passion for growing cacti (and plants in general) and has been triggered by seeing a snippet of a performance of John Cage's music I saw in a documentary film. I do not remember the title or the specific music piece. Nonetheless, when I saw someone playing on cacti, I knew that I will "steal" this idea without any hesitation. The use of a cactus as a musical instrument combines multiple important factors which fit my setting well. It has an irreplaceable and unique sound quality, sounding fragile but simultaneously being recognized as a robust defense system of an indomitable organism. It brings great contrast to the otherwise mostly synthesized and loud electronic setting, by being often the only unprocessed acoustic sound source. By its nature it comes across as a "soft" sound, however much amplified. It has the symbolic quality of being a living organism and inspires environmental thinking; being a living organism while being used merely as a device for producing sounds strikes a discourse about the use and abuse of nature. I do not further emphasize on this aspect by for example modifiying the way how I play it. When

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[52] See Appendix #3

[53] See Appendix #13

[54] See Appendix #14

performing, I approach it only as a music instrument, however its symbolic quality is of great importance. That is being communicated to the audience merely by its presence on the stage. If it was only about the sounds, I could've instead chosen perhaps a different object with simmilar sonic characteristics, which would be most deffinitely also easier to carry around and without the possibility of it dying! Yet I chose the cactus with all of its refference and I further let it speak for itself, without me directly explaining or expressing its symbolism and what role should it have. And lastly, it is simply aesthetically pleasing to look at.

Football player [55]

This is the last instrument that I will look at closely. I have a personal sentimental connection to this object. It used to be my mother's childhood toy, which later on became a favorite toy of mine when I was a child and then disappeared from my life for many years until I found it in my grandmother's attic. I immediately fell in love with the variety of sounds it produces as well as the object itself; a beautiful artifact. The toy works as a turn-based football match, where by plucking the separate football players attached to springs, the ball is gradually moved all the way to the goal. Due to small differences in the springs' characteristics, the strength, length, rust, and how worn out it is, each one oscillates in different frequencies and has unique timbral and temporal quality. The relation of this instrument to the child's play is obvious; it is a toy. And so just by the choice of the instrument, I already managed to bridge the gap between child's play and musical play. But it fulfills this function in another layer, as it is not an electronic or automated instrument, so one has to keep *playing* it constantly, in order to produce any sound. It asks for attention and activation. At first, I simply attached a contact microphone to it and pluck the players. In some instances, I have used some analog processing and used it as a percussive instrument, a kind of drum machine. Then for a couple of years, I left it out of my live setup, while I was constantly provoked to do something with it, yet I didn't know what. Only recently, I began to work on a collaborative project with Yannis Michos to give this object a musical life. We have made it into a standalone sound installation by building a mechanical robot with the use of stepper motors, microcontroller, and other mechanics. We called the installation simply *Football Player.*[56] This robot is able to play this game of football with itself, following the coordinates of each player, while it also talks "to itself", sometimes more, and sometimes less related remarks. The speech was generated with a text-to-speech synthesizer. The text we have partially produced ourselves and part was generated by an AI. The purpose of it in the installation is to give the robot a pseudo-human character while making it obvious that it is not a human. Sometimes it small-talks or talks about fabricated memories. Sometimes it refers to football or sound art, often in a pejorative or angry manner. Sometimes it talks complete nonsense.
In the time of sometimes exhausting discussions of the intelligence of inanimate

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[55] See Appendix #15

[56] See Appendix #16

entities, AI, robotics, etc., this installation aims to elevate the often grim outlook on the future, where "AI might steal our jobs, our artistic practices, or even our fragile concept of feeling special". The elevation happens again through exploring play, one of the specific aspects of existence of the animate beings. This installation aims to look into the playfulness of the inanimate-intelligent. By giving the task of playing to a machine, it very clearly shows the immediate absence of meaning. It is us who want to play that game! Why should we watch a robot do it for us? The delay between each move of a player is also long enough to further provoke the observer to action. And the game is pointless also from another aspect, since the robot is playing against itself, so there is no winner after all. Combined with its mundane verbal character, all the joy of a game is killed — it becomes absolutely boring.

A strong connection to play can be seen in the self-imposed challenge. A lot of play happens for example as a result of boredom. This boredom, when approached attentively and productively can lead an individual to creating an "unnecessary" challenge to fulfill. This project did not come to life through boredom, yet it follows the logic of a self-imposed challenge. By most means it is a needlessly complicated, relatively hi-tech automaton that fulfills a very simple and "unnecessary" task, something like a Rube Goldberg machine, or something I like to call a doohickey. This principle is present among more of my instrument and artworks.

Most of the instruments combined in action with the full structure of a performance can be seen in this footage from my recent performance at Paviljoen Ongehoorde Muziek in Eindhoven.[57]

To sum it up, I don't look at things merely as sound sources but as objects of complex qualities and characteristics. Their relation to me personally is also of importance. I don't want to only extract the sound from the object, but rather to invite in its full complexity of relations and attributes. And although the main focus and element is the sonic universe, it is not the only one which matters. By performing, I am *creating a situation* and involving strangers in it. That has almost a ritualistic character to me and requires attention to the broad network of relations. Anyhow I do want to make the music approachable, I sometimes say (with a hint of embellishment) that I make weird music but such, which is approachable to both little children as well as my grandmother, along with the rest. The playful attitude, the bodily physical presence, the bellow described contextualization, and especially the use of all the mentioned specific objects are strategies for achieving this approachability. And if people come to me after the performance and examine the instruments and ask questions, I consider it a partial success. A couple of times it even happened that when I left the concert hall after my show to smoke a cigarette, people spontaneously came to my table and started playing with my instruments. I could not have been more satisfied!

Almost all of the equipment I've described in this chapter could be achieved through simpler and more convenient means, most often in the digital domain.

To be more prosaic about it — every time before my concert I'm carrying heavy suitcases full of instruments along with carrying a lot of uncertainty about whether everything is going to work as expected. Then I prepare my set for an hour, connecting an excessive amount of cables and more while knowing that I will have to pack everything up again after the show. I always ask myself: why do I bring myself so much trouble, is this really necessary? That becomes even more amplified when some other performer comes and simply plugs in their laptop. But after the show, as reliably as I always question it beforehand, I also always answer to myself that yes, indeed it is worth it and for one reason or another the same could not be achieved through different means.

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[57] See Appendix #17

Composing (with) the context

Context, in which music is presented, is conclusive to how the music will be perceived. Arguably every little thing that is perceivable can affect the observer's experience. There are many factors that play a role; factors sensorial, spatiotemporal, social, cultural, emotional, economic, etc.
For example, the same piece of music might have a very different effect when presented in a concert hall or an underground club venue, or in an open space. It makes a difference if the audience is seated or standing. And much more. To imagine a performance of a baroque concerto in a supermarket with the audience standing in between the aisles of food is a rather bizarre image. I do not dare to claim, that this has not happened before, however in such an extreme example, it is clearly undisputable how the context might change the outcome or even the process. Let's part from this illustrative exaggerated example into more conceivable situations. Some of the context of a musical presentation is always already given, however, some of it can be composed or altered. Be it as it may, adequate attention has to be given to it when composing a musical act. I view it as carefully deciding which keys to understanding the music should be given out to the public and which not. With such a broad abstraction we would not get very far, therefore I will describe a few of the most elemental and influential factors which I focus on within my work.

Light

Most of the role of lighting in my performances I have already described above. It is perhaps the most influential atmosphere building block next to sound in music of mine. Due to multiple of my instruments being light-controlled, I require darkness at my venues. That itself already sets the tone and builds atmospheric context. Sometimes it poses a challenge, for example when performing in an open-air outside venue, the darkness comes with time and so I would have to perform later in the evening. This temporal aspect becomes another influential contextual factor with many connotations. However in some cases, it happens that it is an unsolvable problem, so I am forced to change my setup or the way how I play with it. Nevertheless, it is perhaps the most immediate, direct, and easily recognizable context-building actor.

Site

Perhaps equally as important and one of the biggest context-giving elements. The space where a performance will be presented is often largely given and there is not a lot that can be done about it. But often some small adjustments can be done. Where will I stand, where will the audience be, will they be seated or standing, etc., though

this happens usually already on the spot and is a part of the improvising process. However I do know beforehand some specifications about the venue, and so I can deduce some socio-cultural connotations. That results in my performances being highly site-specific. I always take into consideration to a high extent the type of a site, where I will be performing. Not to suggest that I would necessarily always change my performance to "fit" better. It is interesting to me to also experience the same music being presented in different environments. With its somewhat exciting, wild, lively, energetic nature, it fits very easily in e.g. underground DIY club venues, yet it is always interesting to me to present this music in for example a more conventional concert hall or in a white space of a gallery and experience the differences which arise through different places. I do think it is important to challenge the preconception which certain sites carry with themselves; the question of "what should be allowed in this space and what should be expected from it". However, sometimes I intentionally change the structure of my performances or some other elements of it based on the space. For example, when I was asked to perform in a small church in Jihlava, Czechia, I structured my performance as a requiem,[58] or when I was performing in an outside gallery venue in Ostrava, Czechia, I have involved the unsuspecting public that was passing by.

Staging

Connected to the sites, and a crucial element in artistic presentation generally, is the staging. How do things look on stage, where are they situated, what can the audience see and not see, etc. As I described previously, a lot of my instruments carry a certain visual aesthetic quality important to the "message" of the performance, hence it is desired for the audience to see the objects. I deal with that often by placing the instrument on different pedestals. But since I then direct attention to my table, I need to carefully choose what I want the audience to see. Often I try to hide as much as I can under the table behind a cloth, and I attempt to reduce the clutter of cables and other visually non-essential or distracting elements. I almost always perform standing up, as it allows more mobility, but also since it brings more energetic approach, almost reminding of a DJ constructing moods and atmospheres but with strange sounds. The concern about staging and its visual effect on my music is perhaps the most recent of the contextualizing methods that I am implementing. Most of my performances of the past still exist within the "clutter of objects" scenario.

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[58] See Appendix #18

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Outfits [59]

Related to the aforementioned visual appeal, the importance of the performers' outfit and overall look is influential. Perhaps I have borrowed this attention from rock/pop music, where it has always been a fundamental part of artistic identity. In this aspect, it is similar to theater plays. To say it with the words of Erasmus of Rotterdam: "If anyone seeing a player acting his part on a stage should go about to strip him of his disguise and show him to the people in his true native form, would he not, think you, not only spoil the whole design of the play, but deserve himself to be pelted off with stones as a phantastical fool and one out of his wits?"[60]

Magicianship

There is a kind of performative or even narrative aspect present in my performances, which I like to call magicianship. I am not performing any magic tricks, I mean it rather metaphorically. A magician is someone who delivers an engaging performance of skillfully showcasing tricks that should leave the audience questioning what, how, and why. I do notice some similarities in my attitudes. For example by employing and enhancing certain physical phenomena and mapping them to sounds, basically audifying or in some cases sonifying them. Such as through the omnipresent light & movement modulations; by hovering my hand with the glove over certain objects or people and picking up the electromagnetic fields; by moving the plasma lamp through the air and directly affecting the sound. For someone, who has not been exposed to this technology before, it may seem like magic. Yet even for someone who knows what is happening, I believe the magic isn't lost then. When observing a magician, we are aware of the laws of physics and so we rationally know very well that what is happening is some kind of a trick. Nonetheless, to enjoy the show, we allow ourselves to disregard this rational thought for a moment and willingly allow ourselves to be "fooled". A magician is someone who builds some expectations, the magical, while breaking other expectations, the rational. Another way how I apply this principle, again in a metaphorical sense, is by blurring or scratching the expectations about what a performance is, where it begins and ends, and who the performer is. These expectations are often strongly imprinted preconceptions. But for example, to use a term from the film arts, by breaking the fourth wall for example by talking to the audience or otherwise involving them in my music, I break the expectation of what the position of the performer is, while creating other, new expectations of "what is he going to do now with this situation". In a similar manner, I sometimes like to blur the lines between the beginning and the end of a performance. E.g. by beginning with

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[59] See Appendix #19

[60] Desiderius Erasmus, and Roger Clarke. 2013. *Praise of Folly; and Pope Julius Barred from Heaven*. Richmond, Surrey: Alma Classics.

talking about the beginning, acting as if I'm only setting up the performance, or introducing myself, which smoothly transitions into the musical act. Again, since it is deeply expected, that an act will clearly begin with the first sound and clearly end with applause, even a small deviation can cause a large effect on the overall perception.

There are other aspects that shape the context, there is actually an indefinite amount of these aspects, as everything could be considered. Once in OCCII in Amsterdam, I even implemented the sense of smell by burning large amounts of different incense on the stage while performing music. I sometimes scan people's pockets with the electromagnetic glove, "searching" for their phones or other EM sources. Once when performing in an abandoned coal mine in Michálkovice, Czechia I found an extremely strange object - a very old shoe-drying machine for the miners' shoes.[61] It was still functional and very loud, so it became a part of that specific performance. In one performance with Tristan Beutter and Eric Moser, I was performing on a daxophone, but I hid all of my setup behind a curtain, so one could see only my face; *decontextualizing* the sounds while also creating this again magician-like tease of "what is going on behind the curtain?".[62]
And so on, and so forth. But I believe that the principle is evident.

The acousmatic and decontextualized

The focus on context exists also in one very specific setting — in the absence of context. Or in the attempt to decontextualize music. The existence of electronic music has brought with itself a phenomenon that is necessary to consider in the discourse about context – the acousmatic phenomenon. It has always existed as it originally refers to any sound which is heard without a visually identifiable source. The word, from Greek *akoúō*, "I hear", was describing Pythagoras' practice where his students were listening to his teaching from behind a curtain, to bring more attention to the content, rather than the speaker. In the context of electroacoustic music, this term was re-introduced by Pierre Schaeffer in 1955. From then on acousmatic music was only more and more present. The phenomenon nonetheless brings a question to focus on. In my view, I would break down acousmatic music into two types; intentionally acousmatic and non-intentionally acousmatic. By intentionally acousmatic, I mean such an approach, which actively reduces the contextual character of sounds, or doesn't allow for context to appear, if the sounds are apriori absenting context. I consider for example the theory of l'objet sonore and the tradition of music concrète to be of such nature. However, the increasing and nowadays dominant amount of computer music gave life to, I suggest, non-intentionally

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[61] See Appendix #20

[62] See Appendix #21

acousmatic music. Music, which is produced for one reason or another in an already fully abstract environment, and remains in that abstract non-contextual space during the presentation. I believe that in such cases it is important to question why is the music abstract, non-contextual, and acousmatic and whether it is something that benefits the music or is just a result of the working environment and compositional method. Denis Smalley explains that:

> "[In] electroacoustic music composition in its acousmatic forms (…) a sound-texture or event in its finished guise is rarely the result of a single, quasi-instrumental, real-time, physical gesture. There may be no real sounding body involved nor any aurally identifiable causal action supposedly responsible for making the sound. Information about the synthesis method, computer program, treatment device, etc., is not a substitute for knowledge of source–cause interaction: the 'working gestures' of the acousmatic compositional process do not carry perceptual information equivalent to an intuitive knowledge of the physical gestures of traditional sound-making. Therefore, while in traditional music, sound-making and the perception of sound are interwoven, in electroacoustic music they are often not connected. Not that gesture, sources and causes are unimportant in electroacoustic music. On the contrary they are *very important*."[63]

I myself have a particular approach to this problem. When designing some of my instruments, I create abstract sound sources, unrelated to anything physical, gestural, actual. And in an attempt to bridge it to something gestural, in order to give the audience something to grasp and relate to, I artificially create this context or gestural causality. To give context on how and where the sounds are made is not the aim, so the produced sounds remain acousmatic. I look for ways how to build more connection between the performer and audience, or rather with the sound and the audience, to avoid the non-intentional acousmatic presence. Such as with the light-dependency or movement sensors. The result is a situation, where the audience can clearly understand that there is some link between my gesture and the sound, but it is either too vague or a part of too complex of a system, so the sonic result can not be expected or fully predicted. Meanwhile, the sounds remain completely abstract, not speaking much about their context of origin (besides perhaps revealing their either digital or analog origin). The sounds are abstract, some of my gestures are abstract, yet there is a link present. Some performative movements which I make are perhaps not being mapped to any sound parameter at all, and I do them only for their performative purpose. In this case, I would say that it lies somewhere between acousmatic or non-acousmatic, or reforms slightly the concept.

> "However, what is and is not acousmatic is not clear-cut, since even music where live performers are involved can become acousmatic when the listener cannot connect the sounds heard with the observed physical activity which

[63] Smalley, Denis. 1997. *Spectromorphology: Explaining sound-shapes*. Organised Sound, 2(2), 107-126. doi:10.1017/S1355771897009059. 109.

supposedly produces them. This can happen in live electronic music performance, and is a category of music I call live acousmatic music."[64]

Reacting to Smalley, I would then have to call my type of performance live semi-acousmatic music.

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[64] Ibid.

Knives skimming over animal gut.
Such music! And voice not there!
And someone over again said God,
Bird peeps, as if hanging by a hair.

So here throughout plenty of music,
As from dead angels, as near and far.
As when womb bursts from all the music,
As when they start playing by the bar. [65]

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[65] Zbyněk Hejda. 1993. *A Tady Všude Muziky Je Plno*. Kdm.

Conclusion

It has been a lot of words to describe something so natural to all of us — play. And at the same time, it is not enough, as this research could and will continue to expand further in the future. But since this is supposed to be a conclusion, not confusion, I will keep it simple.

This research has explored the intricate relationship between play and the creation of music, and its diverse applications in different activities. By examining the origins and significance of play in the human experience and its connection to music and improvisation, this research has emphasized the importance of recognizing play as a vital component of artistic practice.

I have described my own approaches to inviting the influence of play in musical practice, yet more general questions on how to accomplish that remain unanswered. And since play is about the process of playing, I hope this research might be inspiring to others to play around and find fitting strategies for themselves and their art.

Conducting this research has inspired me to further explore this area and by specifying and describing some techniques, I came across new questions and made space to look for new strategies. Throughout the study, by diving deep into the topic, it has become evident that the playful approaches to music-making are not as rare as it seemed to me before. I should reflect on the very first words of this thesis — the title, which in an adequately playful manner is slightly taunting and hints at an inclination to change things. However, I would now say: keep making electroacoustic great. And in the context of this thesis, I think that inviting *play* to play a role in that is a viable strategy.

After all, I believe paying attention to this aspect of music-making is quite important and a very useful practice for composers and performers because it presents the very fundamental values of music: to bring people together, have a good time, motivate each other to educate oneself and learn/teach and communicate in an enjoyable manner. Such as would be the values of child's play. Both play and music are about reciprocity. They count on "the other", they communicate. They speak of borders, of freedom. They experiment. And last but not least, they are fun. Let us not forget that.

Yet there is music [66]

[66] Holan, Vladimír. 2000. *Ale je hudba, Spisy sv. 2.* Ladislav Horáček: Paseka, Praha and Litomyšl. 239.

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Appendix

1 - pictures #1a & 1b
2 - video #2
3 - text file with a link #3
4 - video #4
5 - picture #5
6 - picture #6
7 - picture #7
8 - video #8
9 - picture #9
10 - video #10
11 - video #11
12 - video #12
13 - video #13
14 - pictures #14a & 14b
15 - picture #15
16 - video #16
17 - text file with a link #17
18 - text file with a link #18
19 - picture #19
20 - picture #20
21 - video #21