

Wednesday 11. February 2026

Recap of My Recent Work - From a Journal Entry

For too long I've been working on this test piece "Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí", an upgrade of "Uličnická Galerie", this, a completed work for video and sound constructed from a "percussive" video and a found-sound-object improv from "Flat Works" called Beko Bin". About 5'31" in duration. The instrumental parts I added were written simply but the methods for implanting them in the older work were new, maybe innovative. I wanted to explain the composition process to myself and others, if possible, not that I have expectations others would be interested. The new work, a test work, PGsl has uncovered problems that will need to be sorted out as technology advances. In future works.

The most interesting part of this difficult work has been the integration of "standalone" improvisations, those on found objects that I value so. I have had a deep interest in "purposefully unstable artifacts" harkening back to the early 1970s soon after entering the arts not as composer but as a ceramist studying with Leonard Stach who deftly taught the ancient Japanese process of Raku to his students. At the beginning, his explanations flew over my head as they were antithetical to a society I was raised in, one that emphasized forcing one's will and total control over things manufactured. I vividly remember him exiting his studio into the main ceramics room in the spring of 1972 holding a just thrown tea bowl and wryly saying "It's taken me 20 years to learn how to do this!"—a comment I knew he meant both humorously and seriously as this wet bowl was slightly lop sided and unsmooth. I'm sure I laughed on cue. But it was at that precise moment when I thought "I *must* learn to understand what he means here! Why is this crooked pot desirable?" And so I worked on it and gradually came to understand the concept that would overtake my aesthetic. This was only a few years before I was at the University of Illinois and in graduate school—where John Cage's work and ideas were being openly debated. Indeed, when introduced to Cage by Ben Johnston, a composition teacher and a friend of his, I'd already embraced these concepts where I learned that an easy connection between one's will and an artistic outcome often produced emotional and/or socially expected results and that some thoughtful interference may be useful. And yet, since childhood, I'd been taught 1) When making art, skill-efficiency was the highest ideal. 2) If the product is applauded and monetarily rewarded, an easy life is just around the corner. 3) That "difficult" work was easy to trivialize and could thus be dangerous.

Back to problems uncovered. Traditional notation.

Paper scored notation is pretty wonderful. You just need to keep the count, use a human conductor if necessary, a click-track or bouncing ball on video... But if you wanted to integrate instruments performed by humans with a complex external, maybe improvised temporal medium, you had to embrace alternatives short of hiring super virtuosic performers who would not likely practice enough anyways and just mess up your work. Not mentioned in my recent text "Making PGsl", was the most important reason for this new work of mine. First of all, I don't much like the sound of most existing art work as it is too often a mirror of a mirror a mirror of a mirror. A house of mirrors. Terrible. Even embarrassing. Second, it is

possible to interject creative constructs, obstacles, like found instruments (functioning doubly as musical scores) in a way that represses this mirroring to produce artifacts pleasing to “my” eyes, ears, heart and intellect.

What makes work interesting to me like UG and PGs? I’ve determined that it is something we call “spontaneity”. A “chaste” product absent of cliches. One guided by unaffiliated intentions like making toast well and as cheaply as possible. And what is this spontaneity made of? Choices not guided by mirroring and social acceptance. (I must add here that it is possible to trivialize a found object improvisation by playing it with traditional percussion mallets in a traditional way or by over-rehearsing the object or forming an ensemble of Toaster Players of Jefferson County.) Irregular rhythms. Incidental pitch relationships if any. Paradoxically, because the options are so very limited, the absence of alternatives raises modalities to the top of the list—modality being defined as limited options to which a hierarchy evolves. For example, when performing Flat Works, and especially while playing a thin pot lid on top of a metal clothes drying rack that I unimaginatively named “Drying Rack & Lid, 5'43””, a bluesy piece emerged absolutely connected, in a most cliché-like manner, to my past. Did this breaking a Holy rule? No, but for another unwritten rule. When improvising on nonlinear objects, or my sculptural instruments, an acknowledged *confrontational relationship is assumed* [as has always been the case since the very beginning of this work and that is, short of using percussion mallets, and over-rehearsing (just some tapping around before setting record levels)] where my *will* reenters the fray as I do what I can to *tame* this awkward object. To make it totally subservient if possible! But in all instances, this is not fully possible as I end up charmed by the object as it takes hold of me as it guides me to a place I had not imagined. Even in this particular Flat Works improv, I had no idea this bluesy piece was waiting there when it suddenly appeared and took over! Was this my mirror-memory co-opting the performance? An unfortunate lapse? It didn’t feel this way at the time. Quite the opposite, as if these two found objects just wanted to dance and take over the improvisation! Yes, I was obviously, completely involved but more as a willing, doofus participant. For sure, elements of anthropomorphism are present here and quite profound, don’t you think! But this shows the dueling relationship that is established with found object improvisation. A kind of relationship that is diametrically at odds with the “broad path” genius where instruments *must* be transparent, a vehicle to be sublimated to the virtuosity of the master performer.

Back to how nice paper scored notation is.

In working out how to take two truly free improvs on found instruments, one visual and the other aural, (I’ve just put on fingerless gloves in this cold room) and to knit them together nondestructively while retaining their individual, essential spontaneity, I needed to locate and isolate the “elasticity” in both mediums—dead silence in sound and visual padding (handles) in video. With these discoveries in hand, I had for the first time created the possibility for a true 2nd Generation Improvisatory artifact from two 1st Generation Improvisations.

You might quibble with the use of “2nd Generation” here as there wasn’t any realtime improvisation involved. But even in the 1st Generation improvs editing alterations were made that had little or no effect on this spontaneity like those dealing with stereo location, eliminating the sound of a passing tram... When merging, knitting, these two 1st Generation

Improv together, I laid one improv over the other and in “editing time” took near simultaneities and aligned them perfectly, each with a knitted (attachment) point—this process having realtime aspects of its own. Thus “2nd Generation” is probably OK. And, once you start numbering processes, you unavoidably project 3rd Generation possibilities and *this* is where bigger problems were encountered while adding an instrumental score.

To look at [the score pdf of PGsl](#), mostly a reference document, the work looks pathetically easy, even ridiculous. And yet for PGsl to be performed well it must be played perfectly in synch with the wild street gallery video, patrons popping through, using the green conducting line from Sibelius all of it held together by software like QuickTime, or VLC, on a Mac. As there are three possible instrumental lines in PGsl, flute and two bass drum parts, a composite video score (all three instruments notated together) is used with the flutist playing one copy off the main computer and the percussionist(s), playing a “mirrored” score image on an iPad (or two). Problem solved. But what would happen, say, in the case of a string quartet that you may need to break in to solo parts—where it would be advantageous to have four dedicated scores presented on separate devices? Hmm. Tablets (iPads) are getting larger, computers faster and for all I know something already exists that can project four green-line-conducted and discrete parts along with a visual projection. Mind you, the scores do not need to be in the highest resolution either.

This multi-score problem was uncovered making PGsl. The old fashioned paper score will not do as a human conductor visually interferes (destructively) with the projected images. Unwanted interference. Absolute synchronization is essential and the parts must not be too complex. Significantly, the simple instrumental parts appeared similarly nuanced amidst the complexity of the two prerecorded improvisations.

I may have overcome certain problems with my fancy knitting methods, yet the possible technical limitations going forward presents a pretty big bugaboo. I was so consumed with getting this far, I had not researched online whether accessible (cheap) technology already exists to play back, like, four independent, perfectly synched and auto-conducted score parts. If so, is it Bluetooth based? Does it need special hardware and software? Would the cost be prohibitive? The score screens would need to be fairly large. Gray scale would be fine. There is already a latency problem with the green conducting line...

For my next project I would like to do something similar for 2-3, even 4, traditional instruments using composite scores again but, maybe, not quite so simple. An incremental step up. A longer work of about 8-10 minutes. DS

