

BIRTH OF A LEAF

by

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Abstract

Birth of a Leaf is a 22 minute video-collage of structured violin improvisations and gestures, centered around the concept of embodied technique. The violin solos are shown from different angles that each focus on a particular bodily mechanic necessary for playing the music. The gestural movements occur within the plane of the violin, unrestrained by the demands of an actual instrument. Each video clip has been cultivated over the course of a year – a core concept was enacted repeatedly, and allowed to grow and change as it would. Each iteration was filmed and analyzed in writing, which guided the direction of the next iteration. Birth of a Leaf is also inspired by my grandmother's story of watching a trembling leaf bud for hours, until it unfurled. It connects the concepts of that experience to the music; immersing oneself for an extended period in an alternate mode of perception – continuously maintaining a particular focus in order to notice the otherwise unnoticeable, and experience the beauty of an ever- unfolding process.

Keywords: Violin technique; Embodied knowledge; Embodied research; Structured improvisation; Minimalism; Video-collage; Gesture

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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The past 3 years have been transformative for my creative work.

Before then, composition for me – the primary interface of the activity – was to punch notes into notation software. Yes, I would play on the piano and violin through the process too – but mostly to help me pick what notes to punch in. Though – that's not *all* I did. There was sketching, and experimentation, and larger considerations about form and affect and so on. I did write music that I'm proud of. But – it started with the rhythms. I kept having to change the meter rapidly, repeatedly, in order to accommodate the rhythms I actually wanted. Or sometimes, I wanted no rhythms at all – counting through that music made no sense at all – the way I heard it instead, was that those notes would just be held for long as it felt right. There is, of course, plenty of precedent for unmetred contemporary music, but my issue felt larger than this. The music I wanted to write didn't *fit* into the software.

Throughout those times, I also developed an improvisation practice. It started merely as a curiosity, to try something fun with my undergraduate friends and colleagues. It quickly became an obsession – the music we were making was *good*. Unlike anything I'd ever played before, and generally impossible to recreate through traditional or even contemporary scores. It was alive, and free, and oftentimes quite messy and unremarkable. But it provided a critical space for me to breathe, experiment, grow, and express myself – *my self*. And though I created improvised performances and pieces – I considered them mostly secondary to my traditional scores.

The third piece of my background: I used to believe that to be a good violinist, a professional violinist, I'd have to maintain my classical performance practice. Practicing my scales and etudes and repertoire for x number of of hours every day, and so on.

The projects I've completed since starting the MFA program at SFU have increasingly led my practice in directions I couldn't even envision before. I once referred to myself as a “failed violinist;”¹ as it turns out, this can lead one down some very interesting paths. I'm less interested now in subscribing to whatever it means to be professional. Now, I'm more interested in doing what's necessary to tell my stories. With artistry, beauty, mastery, playfulness, curiosity, flexibility. With loving attention. With an audacious gaze to the horizon.

My new projects have been collaborative, experimental, multi-disciplinary, and primarily improvised:

1. “Focal Rift”² was a collaboration involving live dance, shadows, staging, an overhead projector with a cracked lens, live painting, video and electronically processed violin. My colleagues and I created it by improvising together, each within our respective disciplines. This was a way for us to have a dialogue; those conversations later became the piece.
2. “Heights”³ is my longest solo piece yet, performed live in Studio D for the *seams* festival. It was 45 minutes weaving together drawings projected onto the floor, recorded soundscapes, violin, piano, live and recorded, electronic and acoustic. All while wearing shorts and body paint. This piece was an opportunity to take responsibility for the full performance space, and integrate and layer together many different elements – the circles painted on my body, with the

1 See Appendix A, page 18.

2 Kourosh Ghamsar-Esfahani; Tomoyo Yamada; Caitlin Almond, “Focal Rift,” Youtube Video, 10:34, March 2, 2019, <https://youtu.be/IUxhRYQ3UWU>.

3 Kourosh Ghamsari-Esfahani, “Heights,” Vimeo Video, 47:44, June 1, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/339707004>.

circles invariably projected onto the floor, with the same chord progression repeated over and over in different ways.

3. “Coral Calls for Cloud”⁴ was a collaborative, improvised opera production, created by the ensemble-in-residence and our librettist Meagan Woods. This was a chance to apply all of our combined musical skills to a singular story.
4. “Stratosphere” was my first, professional commission. A graphic score, for solo bass clarinet. I used a touch screen and illustration rather than notation software – it is 'hand-drawn' in a sense. This project was groundbreaking for me in that I started to think in clarinet sounds first, rather than notes.

In all of these projects, improvisation has been a central pillar, and there is little traditional scoring. The primary interface of my practice was no longer music notes – it became my body, and sound, and image – and the physical space around us. Through the process of interdisciplinary critique and collaboration, my attention was expanded to include the immediate senses and experiences of everyone involved. For instance, I'd always known that costume and lighting would have an effect on the experience of a recital. But those considerations were always secondary, and often left to the last minute. In the MFA program, however... costume, lighting, staging, poetry, movement, audience perspective, venue, etc – everything became a fundamental element in the creative process, deserving of equal consideration.

“Birth of a Leaf,” my graduating project, is my furthest step yet on this new path. Something about my grandmother's story struck me, stayed with me. She has always loved the natural world. She loves it so much that she would literally sing any time we went into the woods, as if she was experiencing it all for

⁴ Breathing Bass, “Coral Calls for Cloud: Episode 1,” Youtube Video, 28:15, March 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG9X9ZdRf0E&ab_channel=CasperLeerink.

the first time, every time. Something about that love is incredibly tender, and wise. What a tenacious curiosity! That tenacious curiosity, that inexhaustible sense of wonder, is what struck me about her story. Most of all, in those moments ... *she is fully present to the experience.*

I could learn from this.

I dislike this word 'problematize.' I did not come to SFU to problematize my art. I came here to become a better artist. Seminar class changed my mind, though. If I don't problematize the big picture for myself, I end up subscribing to the status quo, a result of previous problematizations, by others. In my case, it meant subscribing to the rituals and practices of classical music.

Wear a tuxedo. Walk on stage – with purpose – take a bow. Play the thing I composed and practiced to perfection. All that matters is the music. The audience sits in silent reverence until the experience is over. Then they clap. Often in Canada, they give standing ovations... as a courtesy. I take a bow. Exit stage-right. That's all that mattered, right? Or at least, all I had time to think about.

But... I also wanted to feel the ground with my feet. I was curious – how would my playing change if I was rooted, really rooted, to the earth? So, the dress shoes were in my way. So, I got rid of them.

The tuxedos and dress shirts were in the way, too. My body – I had something important to *show*, with my body. Long had it been a site of physical pain from my myriad injuries. Emotional pain, too – from failing as a violinist. And of course, from shame, from continuous attempts at smallness, restrictiveness

and hyper-precise self-control. So ... I took advantage of the opportunities in this MFA to turn my body into a site of creation. To delve into a practice of therapeutic repetitions, to become fully present to the knowledge held by my body, down to my bones. In our studio classes – where our priority was the immediacy of experience from all our senses ... my body was free to play, dance, draw, sing. It could stop being merely the means to play predetermined notes, and start telling its stories.

I still dislike this word, 'problematize,' but I can revel in it too. It's challenged and overturned my old beliefs, habits and practices. It's helped me start asking some interesting questions about my art, and art in general:

Was I moving over top of the stage, or through it?⁵

Are my various gestures communicative, instrumental, or performative?⁶

How does my instrument's history as an object influence my performances? ⁷

Most importantly, what was actually happening in my body? Why did I need so much physical therapy? Why was my foot shaking? Why was my bow bouncing no matter how hard I tried to keep it still? Ben Spatz's work in *What A Body Can Do*⁸ helped with these questions in particular, and became the foundation from which my knowledge of my own body could grow by leaps and bounds, as will be shown in the following section.

5 Tim Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): S126-S127, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01613.x>.

6 Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 15-16.

7 Laura U. Marks, and SFU Faculty Publication, *The Skin of the Film : Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Sense*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 79-80.

8 Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, (London ; New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

CONCEPT

Part 1: Theory

The theoretical foundations of this project have fully been laid out, in detail, in my paper for CA811, which can be found in Appendix A. From that paper, I wish to briefly highlight and expand upon two sections.

I relied on Ben Spatz' definitions of 'embodied research,' 'technique,' and 'practice' in *What a Body Can Do*⁹, to structure this project. In designing each of the component pieces of Birth of a Leaf, I first looked for motions in my body that felt significant somehow. Rocking. Quivering. Tension located somehow in the space behind me. Holding, breathing. Minutiae of the bow. Hand gestures, and ways of touching the violin. Etc. These were motions that were occurring repeatedly and often involuntarily in particular ways. So, I conducted embodied research – designing experimental improv pieces that center these motions – and repeating those pieces over the course of a year. Each iteration was an instance of 'practice'. I didn't want to just understand the techniques – the embodied knowledge – behind those motions. Through actively engagement and play, I wanted to also let them expand and grow in my body, in order to generate musical material that was previously impossible for me to imagine. Instead of designating particular sounds – scoring them, even – and honing my body in an attempt to produce those sounds, I decided to let my body change, and see what sounds would result.

The second section concerns Tim Ingold's "Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," his definitions of wayfaring vs. transport, and his recontextualization of the ground as a living, dynamic system rather than a flat surface.¹⁰ In my paper for CA811, I consider the violin itself

⁹ See Appendix A, page 20.

¹⁰ See Appendix A, page 25-26.

as a kind of ground. My hands can move through it slowly, as wayfarers – learning and changing along the way – or, across it as passengers: traveling quickly and powerfully across predetermined roads. For the graduating project, I suppose we could say that I finally took some time to draw and redraw that ever-changing map – not only of my violin, but also of my own body. I focused on particular techniques – or, repeatedly wayfaring in particular directions, with the aim of discovering new pathways.

Part 2: Guiding Principles

Improvised pieces, especially unstructured ones, can easily spiral out into too many directions and lose any sense of meaning. So, focusing narrowly on one parameter at a time, observing its evolutions, observing its slow changes over time – this is often a fruitful starting point for me. Poetically, it also makes sense – my grandmother's experience with the leaf bud could be described as enrichment resulting from maintaining an extended focus on something small and seemingly simple.

Repetition, in this context, is also important: it gives opportunities to notice more and more of those small details. It was a major element of my approach to the embodied research portion of this project – I chose my pieces, and repeated them daily, and weekly. That allowed me to not only get to know the pieces intimately - sounds, movements, techniques – but also to watch them grow and change.

Sometimes, as I discovered a particular sonic or physical detail ... that would become the basis for an entirely new piece.

A natural result of the aforementioned approaches – reduction and repetition – is that the attention can more deeply turn to sound, and all its minutiae and qualities. Focusing on one small sonic detail at a

time, extending and repeating that focus, progressing to another detail, or the same detail from a different perspective. Where exactly on the string I chose to strike the bow, with what kind of force, and from what angles – this became a central consideration for how to develop my pieces.

As for my left hand... the violin does not have frets, so intonation – or rather, knowing where the notes are on the fingerboard – comes down to skill and muscle memory. And we learn a particular temperament in classical violin – notes outside of that temperament are considered... well, outside. Odd. Eccentric. Out of tune, even... but out of tune with *who*? Intonation is always referential. And this is a solo project. *The violin does not have frets*. Its natural state includes complete and total flexibility of pitch. So, I made it a point to first, reduce the notes. And second, welcome sounds in between the notes. When one of my painstakingly trained fingers would fall just a bit off of where I'd intended... rather than flinch, I tried to listen, and respond. Through this process, I found a handful of tones that, in reference to my open strings, created beautiful sounds that I couldn't have imagined before. Then I started to deliberately look for such tones, and incorporate the process into my improvisations. So, an embodied research approach to intonation was also something that guided me.

The affect of the piece has its own subsets of qualities. Gentle holding. Tenderness. Stillness. Loving touch. Loving care. Delight. Celebration. These are my grandmother's daily habits ... towards her houseplants. (And towards her grandchildren.) Communicating this story properly required music that is highly expressive. I partially utilized harmonic language for this – with a reductive approach, I established a landscape of many perfect intervals, and open strings. The violin's natural, open sound. A somewhat neutral sound. And then at select moments, there would emerge luscious intervals of 6ths (and others, during progressions). I also used pace and phrasing for expressiveness – repeated ebb and flow, slow-building swells and sighing releases.

PROCESS

The piece is primarily improvised, in both musical and gestural material. Originally, I had planned to score it – every note and every quality of that note already chosen and written down. Though originally, I'd also planned to perform this live, on a theater stage, to a packed crowd.

There are many sound reasons to choose improvisation. It can be richly generative, offering flexibility and freedom of expression. Given that my goal as a violinist was to interface as much as I can with my own embodied knowledge – it seemed better to get my hands on the instrument and play, rather than sit at a desk with pen and paper. As well, when I don't have to strive to master already chosen notes, then I have the space to listen to all the sounds coming out of my instrument, and consider the bodily knowledge at their source.

Musical improvisations can be thought of as alive, in their own way. If so... everything depends on the kind of environment that is provided for them. A totally free improvisation – one with no rules, guidelines or conceptual basis – is just one kind of piece. Improvisation's full potential is found within the endless variety of limits and parameters that can be placed around it. Which pitches am I allowed to use? Is there a time limit? Is it rhythmic, or perhaps metered? Am I only allowed to use sustained notes? Should I stay within certain harmonic languages? Answering questions like these and more becomes a process of *design*. Limits not only drive innovation, but also become the boundaries of the piece – they become its shape. Then... a conversation can begin between what is determined, and what is possible. A conversation that I repeated, over and over, for this graduating project.

In improvised performances, unintended sounds are a given – so we learn how to turn them from 'mistakes' into 'features'. We repeat those surprises. We respond to them, *play* with them. Every sound coming out of my instrument, intentional or not, is caused by a motion flowing from knowledge in my body. Many of those sounds would be considered mistakes or bad form according to classical technique. Yet, in practicing relentlessly to eliminate those sounds, it often felt like I was fighting my own body, and my instrument. So, to give those mistakes a chance to be something else... to give the embodied knowledge behind them – knowledge which stubbornly refused to be suppressed – a chance to be *expressed*... That would allow me to finally start understanding my body more holistically, and to tell its stories. That is why I chose improvisation as the primary method of embodied research.

I also wanted feedback from multiple perspectives. Hence, filming every iteration of the piece, and its various pieces. Phase one of the project was mostly brainstorming – trying many different concepts and parameters. From that initial batch, I chose the following improvised pieces:

1. Quivering
2. Rocking
3. Back Tension

A former violin teacher taught me a trick once. He told me to put the instrument down, and mime playing the violin. Then I wouldn't have to worry about playing correctly, and could actually envision the musicality that I really wanted. Since I've wanted to learn about embodied violin knowledge, free of the pressures and demands of mastery... then it was only natural to put my instrument down and mime. Through the experience of the improvisation process, my curiosity slowly took me beyond violin motions. First, to violin-like motions. Then, to all kinds of gestures: with my hands, arms, torso, back, even my breathing. That's how I took my teacher's trick, and turned it into 'Rocking' and 'Back

Tension'.

Another violin teacher also taught me a trick. He let his bow drop on the string, and let it bounce and bounce and bounce. It went on longer than any of us in his class thought possible. He would get this spark in his eyes, whenever he was really excited to show us something like that. A bouncing bow is difficult to control – it's less secure and more unpredictable than drawing the bow. Yet he did it with not just ease, but *delight*.

A former composition teacher's very first assignment to me was this: “Compose a piece using only one pitch.” I laughed, initially. But then, I learned so much – of all of the different ways the same pitch can be played, and how those different ways can combine to make a piece. I took her concept and made it part of this piece, too. I combined both teachers' tricks – An endlessly bouncing bow, centered on mostly one pitch, to form the basis of 'Quivering'.

An improvisation teacher once suggested this to me: “Record 4 hours of yourself improvising. Push yourself far, far beyond how creative you think you can be. Then listen back.” So I took these 3 pieces that I chose, and recorded myself playing them over and over and over. Keeping the concepts, but adjusting the parameters each time. Watching, listening, taking notes, reflecting, questioning.

“What does this need more of? Less of?”

“What about this is engaging? Where is it boring?”

“Did I commit to this piece? Did I give up on it? When?”

“What patterns do I see?”

“What connections do I see?”

1. Quivering

The first parameters were: sustained bowing, and only on the open A string. I played long notes, short notes, fast and slow bows, loud and soft. I necessarily had to be creative with the quality and timbre of the sound in order to keep this engaging. To that end, eventually it was not only open A, but that same pitch fingered on different strings.

The ricochet bowing was also an attempt at varying timbre. When I was exploring the smallest possible bounces – this is where the connection with my grandmother's story first occurred for me. My bow arm was barely moving at all, and the tip of my bow was just shaking, in place. But the sound combined with that particular visual had this effect of drawing the attention inwards, towards itself. The connection was powerful enough that this *had* to be the defining parameter of the piece. Sustained notes tend to be more audible than bounced ones, and can easily overshadow them... so, sustained notes were no longer allowed.

Given such restrictive rules, eventually it became clear that phrasing is much more critical for the success of these improvs. It was intimately connected with breathing, and pacing. Thankfully, I had already had a chance to deeply explore this skill set in my previous solo violin piece – Heights. At the time, I did dozens of takes for each piano clip, with the singular purpose of finding those special phrases – the ones where every element was held just long enough, where ebb and flow felt perfectly natural. I think, possibly, the best example of my use of phrasing in Birth of a Leaf is when we hear violin for the very first time.¹¹

In continuing to vary the timbre, I also started to strike the string from all kinds of angles and positions

¹¹ Kourosh Ghamsari-Esfahani, "Birth of a Leaf," Vimeo Video, September 16th, 2021, 2:55 to 3:26, <https://vimeo.com/605804177#t=175s>.

– both along the violin, and along the bow. In this way, I was able to access a host of sounds within ricochet: hard, velvety, sticky, gritty, brushing, woody, etc.

Finally, I discovered that striking the bow at points on the harmonic overtone series produces a very particular sound; this can be heard near the conclusion of the piece.¹²

2. Rocking – Cascading – Swaying – Hand Gestures

I saw that when I play the violin, that my body would swing left and right, back and forth. This was especially so, any time I wanted to play more expressively. Why was my body asking for this?

I started these improvs by miming playing the violin. I would imagine the notes and bowings, while just being mindful of the rocking motions. Then, I started to exaggerate the rocking motions – doing them more, so I could understand them more. On the advice of my professors, I stopped imagining the notes, and instead tried to improvise using only the rocking motions themselves. Maybe, I could think of them as a kind of pulsation, making their own phrases.

Generally, this looked *terrible* on video. It looked forced and unnatural. I looked a little bit like a character in a horror film, rocking back and forth, trying to find comfort. And yet, that's what my body needed, no? *Support and comfort*, in response to stressful stimuli.

I found this cliché effect could be attenuated by severely restricting the range of the rocking motions. And to address the constriction, I tried Cascading motions instead of rocking. I imagined a locus of activity, moving in various directions across my body; this could provide follow-through and release for the rocking motions. This helped.

¹² Ghamsari-Esfahani, “Birth of a Leaf,” 18:20 to 19:12.

I then attempted an alternate mode – swaying. I thought about rooting the rocking motion as deeply as possible to the ground, and cascading upwards. This helped greatly – the motion was softer, more natural, less forced.

This, then, allowed my torso to become the supportive surface against which my hands could begin to gesture, as seen in the introduction and conclusion of Birth of a Leaf. A surface that is both solid and soft. Providing both strength and tenderness. The fabric of the shirt I wore was also chosen with this in mind.

3. Back Tension

After the first week of improvisations, I noticed an invisible wall of tension. It seemed to be located not in my body, but in the space behind me. This tension was dynamic, too – it had an ebb and flow to it. So, I turned my back to the camera to play.

Then, I followed a similar path to Rocking. I mimed playing violin with my back to the camera. Then I freed my arms from their violin duties; I either let them drop, or would fold them in front, out of view. I was progressively narrowing my focus on my back – attempting to play with only the tension itself. Finally, I followed an impulse to take my shirt off.

As I stood in place, deliberately holding and releasing that tension behind me, the camera caught the minute changes in my back muscles. Small, but intriguing. Making my back no longer a body part but a landscape. Drawing attention inwards towards itself. In this way, this piece became connected to the others. Narrow focus, small changes over time. A slower vibration in and of itself, that could be in

dialogue with my quivering bow. In counterpoint with the pace of my own breathing.

Through the improvisation process, my arms and hands also became curious and desiring to move. I eventually allowed them to, but kept them in a supportive role to my back. Hands can so powerfully command a viewer's attention. So, this part was both fruitful and challenging.

4. Birth of a Leaf

Originally, the project was supposed to be a live performance, with fully notated score, and video-projections behind me on stage. The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to envision the project entirely as an online experience. It simplified the task, in a way – rather than choreographing multiple visual elements simultaneously, I was able to show visual material in one sequence.

The 3 pieces I had developed in the studio were filmed, in multiple takes, over 4 days – 2 for the gestures, and 2 for the music. While developing the pieces by myself, I was alone and had limited options for experimenting with the camera. On the final filming days, I had a camera crew. So, I took that opportunity to film my pieces from as many different angles as possible. I particularly asked for super tight close ups and unconventional angles. The minimalism was partially at play here – I wanted extended focus on a small area in order to expand one's experience of it. I also wanted to let my body tell its story, pulsing and vibrating in place, just like the leaf, just like individual cells.

Out of several hours of footage, I chose 20 minutes to edit together; 3 iterations of quivering from various angles, and 2 iterations of hand gestures, as well as the recording from my grandmother to frame the piece.

I knew that I wanted the audience to see my back, to see the small movements in the muscles as I held still but also moved. But, the back tension videos just did not have a place in the final project; that is why I compromised by playing a Quivering improv again, but having the camera focus on my back.

On the final days of filming – I let the parameters relax and fall away. By that point, I'd honed each piece well enough that I didn't need to play them strictly according to the rules – I could frame and interject each piece with rule-breaking moments. Moments which did not compromise the boundaries or definition of the piece, but rather accentuated them. An example of this is the sustained notes at the transition section, before the final Quivering iteration.¹³

WHAT I'VE LEARNEDQ

I learned to breathe a little more. That I need to let myself breathe more easily. This is somewhat visible with my gestures in the closing scene of Birth of a Leaf.¹⁴

I learned, even more than before, to be generous with space. Space in-between and within my phrases. With space for the phrases themselves. With space for my breaths – both across time, and within my body. Space for the duration of the entire piece.

13 Ghamsari-Esfahani, "Birth of a Leaf," 13:34 to 15:24.

14 Ghamsari-Esfahani, "Birth of a Leaf," 21:30 to 22:18.

I expanded my concepts of form, drama and poetry. It was a fruitful challenge to balance and layer so many different artistic elements – musical, non-musical – so that they synergize, rather than compromise each other.

I learned that my training as a classical violinist, and a music academic, had more pull on my sensibilities than I ever realized. It seems so obvious now – my creative work does not need to depend on the rituals of Western Art Music in order to be taken seriously. There are infinitely more interesting, impactful, and poetic ways of framing a piece of music. Birth of a Leaf was framed just fine. The shirtless scene was just fine.¹⁵

I very much look forward to learning more.

¹⁵ Ghamsari-Esfahani, “Birth of a Leaf,” 15:26 to 20:05.

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APPENDIX A: CA811 Final Paper

I am a failed violinist.

I did not fail due to a lack of talent or effort. I have plenty of inherited musical knowledge to draw from, I love the music passionately, and I've toiled on the instrument for decades. Furthermore, I had access to good education, finishing a Bachelor of Music in Performance under the tutelage of the Penderecki String Quartet. Yet, my sound is peppered with errors: trips, slippages, imprecise intonation, extraneous noises. Most violinists struggle with this; the common wisdom is that we just have to practice more, and practice better. I tried those solutions... I need something more.

I am treating this paper as an opportunity to examine what went wrong. Performance studies has exposed me to new ideas that could be transformative for my practice, which now includes composition, improvisation and electronic music. Thus, I aim to propose: alternative techniques, new conceptions, and potential research. The foundation of my investigation is laid using mostly Ben Spatz' *What a Body Can Do?*¹⁶. His definitions of technique and practice alone are something any violinist could benefit from. I will then survey Carrie Noland's *Agency and Embodiment : Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*¹⁷, in an attempt to parse and advance my practice in terms of gesture. Next, based on the concept of Haptic Visuality as developed by Laura Marks^{18 19}, I explore whether a complication of touch and its interactions with sound would be productive. I conclude this paper with insights gleaned from Tim Ingold's "Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing,

16 Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, 47-48, (London ; New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

17 Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4, ProQuest Ebook Central.

18 Laura U. Marks, and SFU Faculty Publication, *The Skin of the Film : Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Sense*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 2.

19 Laura U. Marks, and SFU Faculty Publication, *Touch : Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii.

Knowing.”²⁰ He reframes the ground as a self-renewing interface; in analogue, I reframe the violin as something more than an inanimate tool.

I will not foray into gender studies or identity politics. Both are highly likely to be relevant to the music that I make, but the scope is just overwhelming for this paper—I will investigate these branches, hopefully, in a future project.

According to Spatz, “Technique is knowledge that structures practice.”²¹ It is fractal, as if growing along tree branches. Practice is one instance, each time, of a specific technique becoming reality: “If we look at chunks of human life bounded in time and space, we are looking at practices. If we look instead at the transmissible knowledge that links such chunks together across time and space, we are looking at technique.”²² Technique is repeatable knowledge, whereas practice is different every time. Thus, practice can be embodied research, which can lead to discovery of new technique.²³ Technique can also become embedded in the body at different depths, at once limiting and empowering me.²⁴ Finally, technique is a way of coming to know as well as interacting with the relative reliabilities of the world.²⁵

The story is starkly different for classical violinists. We must learn “Technique,” which means learning scales, arpeggios, and études. I was tested on them every year in my undergrad. The rationale is that such content is sufficiently prevalent in actual repertoire; thus, by learning these patterns of movement and sound AS technique, one won't have to learn them again each time they occur. Books upon books have been published on technique, promising to transform one into a better, more capable,

20 Tim Ingold, “Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): S124, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01613.x>.

21 Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*, 1.

22 Ibid, 45.

23 Ibid, 61.

24 Ibid, 55.

25 Ibid, 65.

more *professional* violinist, as illustrated by this lively discussion thread on violinist.com.²⁶ At the same time... it is understood that technique *sounds* mechanical and meaningless. It must be transcended if anyone is to actually enjoy the sound. This model of technique is a classic example of what Spatz calls “The Trope of Excess”:

This perspective holds that the value of poetry—and by extension other creative practices—lies not in technique, but in a “residuum” that is “left over once technique has been subtracted” (George 2007: 196). Coleridge called this residuum “genius.” Today it may appear under other guises, for example in the commonplace assertion that a given practice or knowledge is “more than” mere technique. I call this essentially romantic gesture the *trope of excess*. It consists in identifying a particular practice as “more than” the enactment of technique and, by implication, dismissing other practices as merely technical.²⁷

The takeaway here is that ALL sounds played on a violin— as well as the motions that produce them— flow from technique. By extension, playing beautifully, meaningfully or expressively *is* technical. One has to *know* how to do it in order to be able to repeat it. In a way, this is already understood among performing musicians. How can the star soloist play something beautifully on stage if they've never *practiced* it that way? At the same time, this kind of work is considered non-technical; its status as transmissible—or teachable— knowledge is of low priority. I distinctly remember one violin teacher telling me that he just cannot teach me how to play meaningfully- that part would have to come from my own 'genius.' Thus, my first proposal for un-failing as a violinist is this: I will no longer try to master the notes and rhythms first, and then try to perform 'with feeling' afterwards. Instead, from the very start I will look for techniques—whether discovered by myself or others— to turn my movements into sounds with the desired affect. In other words, I will treat my practicing sessions as opportunities for embodied research.

Carrie Noland offers three potential categories of gesture:

1. Communicative— delivering meaning.

26 Violinist.com, “List of must practice violin technique and scale books,” last modified March 21, 2017, <https://www.violinist.com/discussion/archive/29180/>.

27 Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*, 56.

2. Instrumental—accomplishing a material task, such as striking a match.
3. Performative—where the gesture, by virtue of its existence, IS the meaning.²⁸

She underscores these different definitions with the insight that the sensorimotor experience of them is the same regardless of context: “on the level of sensation and quality of effort, there is no way to distinguish between an expressive gesture and an instrumental skill.”²⁹ She continues:

Either way, the gesture— communicative, instrumental, or aesthetic— draws on a kinesthetic background; in order to move[...] As I will repeatedly demonstrate, the term “gesture”—because it evokes the kinetic-kinesthetic loop— belongs to a phenomenological vocabulary just as securely as it does to a linguistic one.³⁰

As a musician, I have available to me physical gestures- ways to move my body, having been deliberately learned as technique, in order to produce specific sounds. I also have musical gestures: these can exist without me even touching the instrument. A motif, a change in texture, a harmonic entity—I can compose them, draw them, hear them in my head. They are affective and meaningful, mostly within a neo-romantic aesthetic. My physical gestures are worthless if they can't deliver or communicate my musical ones.

If I were to let Noland destabilize this system... some interesting questions arise. What affective qualities can my physical gestures have, regardless of what I had sketched in my head? On the flip-side, how does a virtual gesture *feel* in my body? What movements does it generate? Here, I draw again on Noland:

[...]a gesture can be more than the instrumental probing of an object, the parsing of space, the production of a sign, or the apprehension of touch[...] a gesture can also be an experience of itself, that is, an experience of a particular way of moving —abruptly, in agitation, or, as in Derrida’s darkened car, slowly, serenely, with care. Gestures— from physical movements of the body, limbs, or digits to phonic gesticulations— have a definite direction, a specific velocity, rhythm, scope, tonicity. When we perform physical gestures we can sense these qualities and we can also sense how comfortable or taxing it is to produce them. Paradoxically, however, in accessing these layers of sensation through movement, we also become peculiarly sensitive to the constructed nature of our acts; we become estranged momentarily from the practice in which we are

28 Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, 15-16.

29 Ibid, 16.

30 Ibid, 16.

engaged and recognize the presence of not only sensation but also cultural conditioning as it has been inscribed on our muscles and bones.³¹

Gestures are as much an act upon the world as they are an attempt to perceive it. Noland calls this 'kinesthesia'; "If proprioception designates sensory stimulation produced by the self, kinesthesia designates sensory stimulation produced for the self; as such, it opens up a field of reflexivity in which the subject becomes an object (as body) of her own awareness."³² My takeaway is this: in those moments of 'estrangement,' where I become both a subject and an object, lie my opportunity to start critiquing my gestures. Thus, I propose an experiment where I take just one physical gesture that I have learned as a violinist, and repeat it again and again, focussing on the sensori-motor experience. I would journal how it changes—using not just my ears, but also my kinesthesia. Of course, I can also document it in both audio and video, for comparative data. The research can grow from there- the same experiment, but with a virtual/musical gesture. Further on—different gestures, artificial gestures, interdisciplinary ones, etc. Hopefully, I will start to see how my gestures might function or be experienced differently than they normally are.

Within Laura Marks' research, I am drawn first to her discussion of objects:

Meaning, I will argue, is encoded in objects not metaphorically but through physical contact. Following historians and theorists of gifts and commodities, I suggest that objects are not inert and mute but that they tell stories and describe trajectories. Cinema is capable not only of following this process chronologically but also of discovering the value that inheres in objects: the discursive layers that take material form in them, the unresolved traumas that become embedded in them, and the history of material interactions that they encode. I go on to argue that cinema may be considered not a simulacrum but a material artifact of transnational migration. This argument involves a reconsideration of the notion of aura as a way to talk about how objects encode social processes.³³

Marks is talking about objects depicted in film... but it's difficult to overlook the single most salient object involved in my practice: my instrument. Let us consider its auratic history.

31 Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, 211-212.

32 Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, 10.

33 Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 79-80.

My violin was made in Iran, by an Iranian luthier— following that, I became its first and only player, thus far. It is a gift to me from my mother. It has traveled geographically, but more importantly, it has traveled with me across time. Its path is a queer one, right alongside my own: it never realized its full potential; it never played the famous concerto on a grand stage in the hands of a star soloist. Mostly, my hands struggled with it. Every so often, though... every so often, we bloomed, and blew everyone away. “Aura is the sense an object gives that it can speak to us of the past, without ever letting us completely decipher it. It is a brush with involuntary memory[...]”³⁴ Thus, when I touch my violin, I probably remember shadows or impressions of these stories along varying depths of my consciousness and my body. So, from that touch, I probably *hear* sounds—or possibly, my touch-memory inflects the sound. In turn, when I play I probably draw out at least some aspects of the stories, translating them into sound. Is there a technique available to me for accessing these memories with agency? Can I *score* them, like Stanislavski started to score the indirectly perceptible contents of a play?³⁵

Marks' definition of “Haptic visuality” is promising in terms of techniques to get to know my violin better. Haptic visuality is, in terribly glossed terms, the ability to kinesthetically perceive the materiality of something just by looking at it in a film/video context. “In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch.”³⁶ Naturally, the question for me is: how can my ears function like organs of touch? The texture of sound can imitate surfaces: roughness, smoothness, sharp edges. The timbre and amplitude of a sound can mimic distance or closeness. A compositional experiment might tinker with these parameters. Since we are dealing with touch—and knowledge— Marks' foray into Mimesis is also critical:

Tactile epistemology involves a relationship to the world of mimesis, as compared to symbolic representation. Mimesis, from the Greek

34 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

35 Spatz, *What a Body Can Do*, 124-125.

36 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 162.

mimēsthai, “to imitate,” suggests that one represents a thing by acting like it. Mimesis is thus a form of representation based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment, such as that between a child at play and an airplane[...]³⁷

A very traditional technique of mimesis is commonly used in violin pedagogy: teachers have asked me to put the instrument down and sing a passage, so that I may focus on its discursive meaning without mechanical 'excess'. A slightly less traditional approach might be to try and mimic, with my voice, the precise timbres and qualities of a violin's sound. This can be tested using audio-recording and spectrometry. Stepping even further... I tried to contort my body into the shape of a violin. (I am not a flexible man). Immediately, I recognized certain things that had eluded me before: The violin is shaped in curved gestures. One could conceptualize the sound as something that spins along these curved paths—what if I try to make a sound that resists that shape? What about a sound that leans into it? I also tried to literally draw a bow across my chest, and to simulate pizzicati by pinching at my chest. Here, I realized that I simultaneously move both *with* and *against* those motions. I am not yet sure where these exercises might lead... but there may be kinesthetic knowledge to be gained, here. Mostly, I am just trying to 'press up to the object and take its shape.'³⁸

Finally, let us consider Tim Ingold's work. He differentiates two models of the earth: the first is the hard ground beneath us. We build on top of it, and move over it. The second model expands to include the thin band of earth in which terrestrial life is possible; it is suspended in the medium of air, and is full of terrain. Significantly, “the ground surface is not pre-existent but undergoes continuous generation. [...] In the living world, [...] the ground surface persists not in spite of reactions between substances and medium, but because of them. Indeed it is through such reactions that the ground is formed in the first

37 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 138.

38 Marks, *Touch : Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, xiii.

place.”³⁹ Ingold also differentiates two modes of movement: wayfaring, and transport.⁴⁰ The wayfarer perceives the immediate environment as they move through it. In the process, the wayfarer themselves transforms, having had to adapt at every turn. The passenger, on the other hand, steps onto a means of transport. They and their immediate environment remains unchanged for the journey; they arrive to point B ideally in exactly the same condition in which they departed from point A. The wayfarer moves through the earth, and the passenger moves over top of it.

Across the surfaces of the violin, my hands engage in both transport and wayfaring. Particularly when I improvise, I am at my peak as a wayfarer—both kinesthetically and musically, I continually survey and choose my immediate paths, in the process coming to know both my instrument and myself. In contrast, my hands are passengers not along roads, but along the myelinated neural pathways of my nervous system. This enables me to perform dazzling displays of virtuosity... in this way, my embodied roads are almost like a technology of Western Art Music. However... the violin is an auratic object—changing its shape according to the weather, and reforming with every bow stroke. Just as the passenger disregards their natural environment while in transport, my quick, skilled hands are in danger of literally losing touch with the instrument, its variegations, and its ever-changing sounds. (In fact, sometimes while I'm playing, my instrument actually starts to fall out of my hands.) I wonder if I will finally start to be able to land those difficult shifts within repertoire if I continually come to know every millimeter of every surface that my hand touches en-route. I think that, perhaps, the following kind of wisdom has been sorely missing from my practice:

[...] moving is knowing. The wayfarer knows as he goes along. Proceeding on his way, his life unfolds: he grows older and wiser. Thus the growth of his knowledge is equivalent to the maturation of his own person, and like the latter it continues throughout life. What distinguishes the expert from the novice, then, is not that the mind of the former is more richly furnished with content – as though with every increment of learning yet more representations were packed inside the head – but a

39 Ingold, “Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing,” 4.

40 Ibid, 6.

greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgement and precision.⁴¹

Violinists are often taught Skilled vs. Unskilled ways of sounding and moving; we are less often taught about Adaptable ways. Transport across an instrument, especially according to an accurate map, is still essential for me... But do not give me a map. Let me draw my own map, and in pencil. Let me be drawing my own map for the rest of my life- as my instrument changes, as my body changes, and as my surroundings change.

To conclude, this paper does not have nearly enough depth or breadth to satisfy my need for answers to the question of my failure. There are papers within papers here that I'm curious to write, research and experiment for. I wonder what I could accomplish if I had a lab, or if I could collaborate with other violinists and teachers.

However, this paper is a start. I needed that.

41 Ingold, "Footprints through the Weather-world: Walking, Breathing, Knowing," 14.

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