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I Felt Unfettered and Alive: A musical narrative inquiry into identity through commissioning and performing new music for solo classical guitar

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Abstract

This paper discusses how commissioning new music served as a means of musical narrative inquiry into the performance of the author's identity. Traditionally, musicology has centred on the identities of composers; their lives, working practices and philosophies. Meanwhile, the identities of performers have remained inaudible. Challenging this conventional narrative, the commission project foregrounds experiences of identity and subjectivity of the author as performer-researcher. This paper introduces the innovative methodology of musical narrative inquiry used in this project, in which lived narratives of identity are told and re-told in collaboration with the composer to explore what it means to be, or become, a classical guitarist in the current musical landscape. The author considers whether narratives of identity are important for how and why artistic practices may continue to be carried out in the 21st century.

Cover Page Footnote

Lecture-recital given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021 under the title: "I Felt Unfettered and Alive": A Musical Narrative Inquiry into Identity through Commissioning and Performance.

I Felt Unfettered and Alive: A musical narrative inquiry into identity through commissioning and performing new music for solo classical guitar[1]

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Who am I?

Prelude

This article is adapted from a lecture-recital given at the 21st Century Guitar Conference, March 2021, in which I premiered *I Felt Unfettered and Alive* by Chris Perren (2020), a newly commissioned work for solo guitar.[2] This performance aimed to demonstrate the experimental methodology of musical narrative inquiry as a means of exploring musical and personal identity. True to the onto-epistemological spirit of artistic research, this performance was research in and of itself. The performance-led project is ongoing and while subsequent recordings of this work may change, improve, or deviate, I have chosen to publish this version that was the focus of the past lecture and of this current paper.

Background

The performance discussed in this paper was given in response of the conference's theme of "unconventional approaches" to research and performance. I used this opportunity, itself unconventional as a fully virtual guitar conference, to present preliminary insights obtained through my current doctoral research at the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre. The piece is part of a larger project which problematises and analyzes identity[3] through commissioning and performing new works for solo guitar. Collaborating with composers to write music based on what (I believe) makes me *me*, I examine how a performer may become an active subject in the music-creation process. The aim of this paper is to provide brief context for the overall project, present the development of an emerging new theoretical and

[1] Lecture-recital given at The 21st Century Guitar Conference 2021 under the title: "I Felt Unfettered and Alive": A Musical Narrative Inquiry into Identity through Commissioning and Performance.

[2] A video of the performance can be found at https://youtu.be/8fR0FczaWOc?t=1445.

[3] Definitions of identity vary across multiple disciplines to offer understanding of this nebulous concept. As an entry point, this research understands that identities are multiple, malleable, and can present both inwardly (as the understanding or regulation of one's *self*) and outwardly (belonging to and working within pre-existing social, cultural or structural groups).

methodological framework, and outline some of the insights obtained so far from the development and initial performances of Chris Perren's *I Felt Unfettered and Alive.*

Context

This project grew from the seeds of existential questions I asked myself in the face of my future career in classical guitar. Put simply:

> *Who am I?*
> *What am I doing?*
> *Does who I am matter for what I do?*
> *Does what I do matter for who I am?*

Before beginning the current research, I studied classical guitar and Western classical music[4] in Australian and European conservatoire traditions, performed freelance and worked as a guitar teacher in schools for almost 10 years, all the while consuming contemporary music and culture and navigating these environments as a young woman. These are likely not unique experiences, yet the journey took me to a crossroad at which I was not sure what kind of music I really liked and really wanted to make.

> *Can I really call myself a classical guitarist?*
> *If I take on that identity, what kind of music am I supposed to play?*

Here, I took a step in a new and unfamiliar direction.

Performing and performative identities

Raymond MacDonald et al (2017) have described musical identities as "performative and social — they represent something that we do, rather than something that we have, namely, the ways in which we jointly engage with music in everyday life" (p. 5), placing musicians within the discourse of the performativity of identity. Performativity is a concept which emerged in linguistic philosophy to describe the capacity of language to result in action, producing a series of effects that perpetuate those actions. Adapted by Judith Butler (1993) into gender theory, it is described as "a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (p. 13). In this context, playing guitar is not only *something I do* in terms of my function or roles in society as classical guitarist, performer, interpreter and researcher. It is also *who I am* in that it is the way I reinforce my identity and pre-existing cultural configurations of the classical guitar.

Naomi Cumming (2000) describes the phenomenon of audible musical choices reflecting inner patterns of "belief, desire and inhibition" (p. 11) as the "sonic self" in her titular seminal work. While the *sonic self* reflects those intrinsic aspects of a person's identity, it is produced and signified through outward performances of music. The sonic self is "not a previously existing element of personality, but a creation that comes into being through sound" (p. 23). Her work is significant for positioning the performer's inner life, their sonic self, in discussions of performativity and signalling identity in traditions of musical performance and listening.

Turning to the classical guitar, it is worth inquiring into how a possible musical identity narrative for the instrument itself became established. Paulo de Assis (2014), lists the tools of "epistemic complexity" that are used to identify musical works in Western classical music broadly (non-specific to the guitar):

1. Materials generated by the composer (sketches, drafts, manuscripts, first prints, revisions of prints, etc.)

[4] In this paper, *Western classical music* refers to the Euro-American tradition of notated art music, differentiated from popular and folk styles. Similarly, *classical guitar* refers to the instrument and style of performance that is traditionally located in this genre.

2. Editions of a "piece" throughout time
3. Recordings of works
4. The reflective and conceptual (musicological, philosophical, analytical, etc.) apparatus around musical works (including thesis, articles, books, etc.)
5. The organological diversity; that is, the musical instruments in use (for example, historical versus contemporary)
6. The performative/aesthetic "orientation" of the performer (historically informed practice, "Romantic interpretation," "new objectivity," "modernizing approach," etc.)
7. Arrangements of works
8. The practitioner's own body, which is biologically, technically, and culturally organized. (p. 46)

Scoping the existing literature concerning the guitar in Western musicological studies, it has overwhelmingly prioritised objects 1–7 of this list. There exists a vast number of theses and articles which trace the physical evolution of the instrument, which analyse well-known repertoire from the typical classical period to the twentieth century, or which describe particular compositional techniques or processes. The analogue era of recording saw the guitar rise to prominence as an instrument 'worthy' of Western classical music ecology through the commercial successes of high-profile performers such as Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream in the mid-twentieth century. While there were a number of widely popular and respected performers around this time, Segovia and Bream are frequently named in the literature as most often-recognised industry successes and dominant personalities. Each produced lasting 'legacies' of prolific recording catalogues, collaborations with contemporary composers of their time and published editions which contributed to current cultural conceptions of classical guitar music and guitarists. These artifacts have been significant in establishing an 'identity' for the classical guitar which have continued to be upheld by subsequent generations of performers, pedagogues and recording industry gatekeepers.

Today, there are Instagram and YouTube channels devoted to showcasing *rising stars* – generally competition winners displaying virtuosic technique and mastery of well-known repertoire – open to commentary by viewers all over the world who, with varying degrees of passion in their praise or criticism, reinforce or challenge their held beliefs of the identity of that piece of music. Technological advancements have also enabled digital production and editing of these videos, to distribute refined, if not synthetic, products that are held as the interpretive standard.

Assis's final object of epistemic complexity, "the practitioner's own body", begins to move the discussion away from the hard materials, products and evidence, towards the soft, experiential concepts of identities, subjectivity and performativity. While the previous objects and artifacts are important for the identity formation of a piece of music, or perhaps for the guitar itself, this focus on guitar music as a 'thing' has overshadowed the concept of music as a 'doing'. This leaves little room for the performance of the player's inner workings and subjectivities in music.

While there is a lacuna in classical guitar research in terms of the musical or social identities among performing guitarists, in contrast, there is more substantial writing on these aspects in the context of the electric guitar and on the cultural experiences of women electric guitarists. In this field, women are subject to gender-coding and sexualisation (Lewis, 2016; Bayton, 1997) and face barriers related to institutional sexism and under-appreciation in the historical-technological development of the instrument (Bourdage, 2011). Perhaps the difference between this literature related to the electric and classical instruments says something about what each genre holds to be ontologically or epistemically important about their instrument – what the role of the guitar or a guitarist is, and how they experience these identities.

The performer

While it is not unconventional or uncommon for musical performers and composers to collaborate through commissions *per se*, this project subverts the conventional view within Western classical music of the composer as the primary agent of musical creativity or authorship, where the traces of a performer's identity have been conditioned to remain transparent or "inaudible" throughout a performance:

> Performers are expected to be inaudible (that's how absurd it is), to disappear like a well-trained servant who knows their place, to provide everything their master needs and yet to do it as if they were not there at all. Or is it more like ventriloquism in which the ventriloquist makes the audience believe that the dummy is speaking? (Leech-Wilkinson, 2020, p. 77)

Meanwhile, historical and analytical scholarship in this genre is "replete with accounts of composers' lives, correspondence, philosophical positions, ideas, intentions, and working practices, we have learned relatively little about these things with respect to performers" (Laws, 2020, p. 132). Here, we can see narratives and characterisations of these roles polarise the musical identities of composer and performer, as well as the balance of power.

Recent studies in contemporary art music offer renewal for these narratives, with examples of co-creation in composition (Groth, 2016), searching for "shared identities" through collaboration (Littleton & Miell) and a "discursive voice" between composer and performer (Gorton & Östersjö, 2020). Their results demonstrate a trend towards both composers and performers finding new insights and understandings through practice, in constant negotiation between the score and all artists involved in the realisation. The current project aims to add to this discourse by exploring the role of a classical guitarist's identity in and through the collaborative-interpretive musical process.

What am I doing?

The project

I have argued, based on previous literature and concepts, that the performer's identity has been overlooked in the creation and interpretation of classical guitar music. To challenge this conventional narrative of musical creativity, I commissioned composer Chris Perren for this project to experiment with subjectivity, foregrounding the performer's previously "inaudible" identity, thereby becoming an active subject within the performance.

Methodology: towards musical narrative inquiry

In the spirit of the conference theme of 'unconventional approaches', I will consider how this project takes an approach that further distances itself from conventional images of academic research – that which favours objectivity, examination and linear pathways. Zahavi (2008) agrees that,

> Many scientists have, until recently, considered the study of phenomenal consciousness to be inherently unreliable owing to its subjective nature and thus unsuitable for scientific research. As Damasio (1999) writes, "studying consciousness was simply not the thing to do before you made tenure, and even after you did it was looked upon with suspicion". (p. 3)

Nevertheless, research that involves reflexive explorations of one's own identities and subjectivities, alongside those of other artistic collaborators, requires a strong methodological framework. At the core of this project is the discipline of artistic research which resides in,

> The artist's research trajectory: his or her knowledge, wanderings, and doubts concerning exploration and experimentation. It is only through the artist that certain new insights into otherwise

> tacit and implicit knowledge can be gleaned and only through the artist/researcher remaining an artist while pursuing these insights. (Coessens et al, 2009, p. 59)

The project centralises my own implicit, embodied knowledge as a performer to explore and experiment with those knowledges in and through performance. From this practice-based starting point, several related but distinct methodologies emerge to further scaffold this first-person research of identity. I have merged these different methodologies into a bespoke framework of *musical narrative inquiry* to suit the dynamic and experimentative nature of this project.

In the broader field of qualitative research, narrative inquiry is used as an "approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 11). As humans use storytelling to make meaning of their experiences, narratives become an effective means of examining the elusive concept of identity (Liebliech & Josselson, 2012, p. 206). Georgakopoulou (2006) explores the use of "small" and "big stories" in narrative analysis to examine concepts of personal identity. Here, "small stories" are "under-represented narrative activities" (p. 123), covering events and actions that may be overlooked in the midst of "big stories", or grand narratives of previously documented data, that have traditionally absorbed the majority of focus in qualitative research analysis.

Clandinin (2013), a pioneer of the practice of narrative inquiry, describes four pillars used to construct such research: living, telling, re-telling and re-living. We live our stories and tell them. In telling them, we reconstruct those experiences in particular ways to particular audiences. Through this retelling, we may ultimately relive the experiences and perhaps change them, shifting the way institutional paradigms are taught or carried out (p. 34). Importantly, narrative inquirers, and participants of their research, are considered within three dimensions of time, sociality and place (p. 39) to examine experiences narratively. Meanwhile, in the field of artistic research, similar dimensions are used to describe the researcher's "web of artistic practice" (Coessens, 2014) as a dynamic background woven and re-woven over time, made of interactions and exchanges between the artist, their communities and environments.

Narrative inquiry has been used with great impact in enhancing arts-based music education research, with notable examples by Bolden (2017) and Kallio & Länsman (2018). However, it appears less common to narrative approaches in the field of artistic research as described by Coessens (2014), where in the context of the current study, the subject and medium of the research is my musical practice. In an artistic practice-based example, photographer Hedy Bach (2012) puts forward a methodology of *visual narrative inquiry* with her photographic research projects that are based on concepts of narrative inquiry, arts-based therapy and her own artistic practice as a photographer. As she writes,

> My knowing of what it means to learn, to construct knowledge, is that the visual is important. Following from this, visual narrative inquiry is an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively. (p. 3)

Innovating on this model, I propose a new methodology of *musical narrative inquiry* as: an intentional, reflective, active human process in which musician-researchers explore and make meaning of experience both musically and narratively.

In this way, musical narrative inquiry allows me to draw a line between my artistic practice and narratives of identity, including my personal histories and embodied knowledges (small stories) and the external, extant narratives of both music and identities (big stories). In the current project, these lived stories are told and examined in collaboration with composers in the creation of new works, and re-told through the medium of musical performance.

Does who I am matter for what I do?

Commissioning *I Felt Unfettered and Alive*

This section discusses the 'small story' related to development of the first commission in this project, *I Felt Unfettered and Alive* by Australian composer and video artist Chris Perren. This is the first of five case studies to demonstrate the telling and retelling of my identity through the methodology of musical narrative inquiry by gathering insights from the small stories (my practice and processes in commissioning and performing), foregrounded in the context of 'big stories' that in the background (the larger socio-cultural narratives of musical traditions and identities).

To give the composers a sense of what my identity is, they were given a link to a blog-style website which acts as a *gallery* of my identity and creative stimulus for the work. The blog includes selected memories, playlists, photos and videos associated with places I have lived, my instruments, my playing, items of clothing, music I have listened to and scores of music I have played. They were invited to take inspiration however they liked, as I was curious to understand which aspects of my subjective 'inner life' stood out or had greatest relevance to them.

Chris Perren is an Australian composer, producer, video artist and electric guitarist. I first heard his music which encompasses electronica, post-rock and contemporary-classical genres while I was an undergraduate student attending intimate gigs in local venues throughout our shared hometown of Brisbane. I continued to follow his work since and have worked with him in a professional capacity as part of a chamber music project in 2017. I am connected to his music through this shared history, as well as my personal affinity with his distinct musical style. Perren was happy to accept my invitation to compose for this project. Although he is a guitarist himself, his locus as a performer is in rock and post-rock genres, and he had not written for solo guitar, classical or otherwise, before. He expressed his interest in exploring this repertoire and offered an interesting perspective on his role writing for the instrument as a guitarist-composer writing for another guitarist:

> I've been thinking a lot about the difference between performer-composers vs. non-composing performers and non-performing composers. There's obviously heaps to be gained by having specialist composers writing for specialist performers, but I also notice that there's a kind of intimacy and fluency in the work of a composer-performer, that is difficult to achieve the other way. But I think your idea could be a nice way to sort of compensate for that a little by bringing more of your personality and identity into the composition process. (C. Perren, personal communication, November 19, 2020)

We spoke on the phone to discuss the project before and after I sent the blog. I reflected on our conversations in research journals (*fieldnotes*), paying attention to how he responded to the stimulus. He referred to a post in which I discuss guitars I have owned, including an electric guitar I played as a teenager. Perren asked if I still play it, and I responded that I have not owned one myself for many years. I occasionally borrow one to play when required though I feel uncomfortable, conspicuous and, as I admitted to Perren, "like a bit of a fraud" when I do. I noted Perren's surprise at this remark: "He was 'surprised at me not feeling completely comfortable' in playing pop music. I said something like 'pop music was my first language but it's like I've sort of lost it now!'" (Author's journal entry, May 29, 2020).

His initial draft was a sketch in standard guitar tuning (EADGBE), experimenting with different thematic ideas in D major. Through online exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic, I sent recordings in which I changed the tuning to drop-D scordatura (DADGBE), prompting Perren to explore alternative tunings. He returned to the blog and rewrote the draft, referencing posts in which I write about listening to Joni Mitchell:

> One of the things I'm working with now is open D tuning. I am a huge Joni Mitchell fan, and she keeps popping up in your posts! So I thought the open D tuning[5] might be a nice homage to her, and also an opportunity to get inspiration from the way she plays. Is that ok with you? […] I think I am going to call the piece "travelling alone listening to Joni" or something to that effect. I absolutely relate to your love of travelling alone - so I'm trying to write something that captures the kind of feelings that come with that experience. (C. Perren, personal communication, July 22, 2020)

The title of the piece developed into *I Felt Unfettered and Alive,* a reference to lyrics from Mitchell's song *Free Man in Paris* (1973). This song is referenced in a blog post that recalls the period I spent studying guitar in Spain; the sense of freedom and adventure I experienced while traveling, as well as feelings of loneliness, isolation and anxiety that permeated during long periods of quiet and solitude. I also describe the music I listened to on long walks around my new surroundings, and Joni Mitchell's albums as a comforting companion. The lyrics remind me of that time, however, rather than being nostalgic about that part of my history, and not of the history of the song itself, I interpret the character of *I Felt Unfettered and Alive* as optimistic and forward-moving as a result of who I am now. These traces of my selfhood, laid out candidly and vulnerably in the creative process, are objects which could have been erased in previous traditional moulds of performance practice.

The tangible artifact of the musical score is notated in both standard notation (the accepted norm in classical repertoire) and tablature (an accepted format of electric and pop-rock guitar notation). This was a conscious choice may be seen as a resistance against allegiance to one particular musical identity, and rather a mode that extends its reach between both of these idioms – reflecting the shared experiences of Perren, myself, and I hope others who may interpret the score for themselves in the future.

Performativity and performance: Does what I do matter for who I am?

The previous section has shown how subjectivities were told and re-told in the pre-compositional and collaborative stages of the commissioning project. This section will focus on the performer's inner workings throughout the performance of *I Felt Unfettered and Alive* contextualised within the 'big stories' of broader narratives in classical music traditions.

The performance given at the 21st Century Guitar Conference was an arguably unconventional experience for me. As my first virtual-pre-recorded-lecture-recital, reflecting on this setting challenged my previous experiences and routines of performance. In normal circumstances, giving concerts is exciting. I enjoy the reaction between performer and audience, the sense of ritual, occasion, and ephemerality. Recording for this lecture-recital, I was uncomfortable. I found myself alone in an eerily silent hall, reapplying lipstick after removing my facemask in compliance with COVID-19 regulations. It was extremely warm on stage, at the height of Queensland's subtropical summer, but I shut down the air-conditioning to reduce background noise. I was able to record multiple takes from which I planned to piece together a *perfect* edit.

Once I had finished each take, I stood up, in silence, to pause or adjust the recording equipment and returned to begin the next performance. There was no affirmation of audience applause, critique or conversation with an audio engineer. I realised that my audience, my conference colleagues, would be listening to this work centring *who I am,* in their homes around the world the following month. Would my identity and future interpretations of this piece be the same at the time of the video's dissemination?

As mentioned previously, musical identities are performative (MacDonald et al, 2017), reflecting a practice that embodies and enables the performer's sense of a sonic self (Cumming, 2000). Cumming describes her

[5] The "open D" tuning Perren describes is DADF#AD.

experiences studying violin as a teenager, an example of using the instrument to become her subjective "voice": "When I began to play it, the sound of this new violin seemed to draw from me something I did not know I possessed. It was as if the violin had the potential to become the voice I lacked" (p. 3). Like Cumming, I have always enjoyed the feeling of performing, using the instrument as my subjective *voice* to express thoughts and feelings without words. Meanwhile, listening objectively to my own performances becomes a tedious, if not painful, act. Throughout rehearsal and recording processes, musicians may find themselves detaching themselves from their subjective voice and observing it from a distance; critiquing and policing it.

Reviewing the footage for the final musical product, I also found myself reflecting on my appearance and choice of clothing. Will my musical choices be interpreted differently depending on my choices in clothing? Wearing black in a concert hall might identify me with classical music, while clothes and makeup that emphasise traditional femininity identify me as a woman. It is noted that women in classical music must "dress cautiously, in a manner that avoids sexual objectification, but also conveys their own personal femininity" (Bartleet, 2008, as quoted in Scharff, 2017, p. 57). I enjoy and am interested in creative fashion, styling and grooming. However, I remain wary of whether presenting as overtly feminine, in contrast to male peers, warrants non-musical criticism or objectification. Or, if presenting more neutral, subdued, will I appear 'mature' or 'serious' but subdue my personality?

These reflections show that it is not only a performer's subjective *voice* they may think about on stage. Frederickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory posits that from a young age, women and girls are socialised to view their bodies objectively, at the cost of their ability for internal self-awareness. Arguably then, women instrumentalists find themselves in a peculiar bind – they are socialised to detach themselves from their subjective voices as musicians, as well as their bodies as women.

When I returned home to edit the video, I found myself facing a new dilemma. The lecture-recital was essentially about performing identity. Editing together only the 'best bits' appeared to contradict the fundamental aim of the research which was to explore how the act of performing might communicate self-identity. Ultimately, I submitted the unedited take that I felt most pleased with, superimposed with a text by the singer-songwriter Nick Cave that reflects and underscores the ever-evolving "patchwork" that constitutes one's identity. As he describes, a sense of identity for many artists is

> perpetually in the process of challenging its own best ideas. Once an idea of self ⋯ is settled upon, this inner subversive begins the business of dismantling it. Yet, this resistance to a fixed identity could be our greatest strength. (Issue #99, 2020, para. 3)

The layers of epistemic complexity into forming an identity for the commissioned piece itself extend beyond the materiality of texts, recordings and established traditions of classical guitar performance.

Conclusion

The significance of a project guided by research questions of a relatively simple nature,

> *Who am I? What am I doing? Does who I am matter for what I do? Does what I do matter for who I am?*

is considered by asking equally simple questions,

> *So what? Who cares?*

The means of judging the success of this experiment is difficult to ascertain at this point. Research into identities, and their ongoing reinventions and reaffirmations, are not complete. Realistically, I do not believe

my own narratives and 'small stories' of commissioning and performing are particularly extraordinary or unique. However, the music created and performed through this practice feels refreshingly new to me, yet somewhat dangerous. Revealing aspects of my own identity, or *sonic self*, to composers and audiences is an unfamiliar and often uncomfortable experience, but this first exploration of a musical narrative inquiry may perhaps broaden the scope of and contribute to critical discussions on how classical guitar music is played, created and received. Challenging conventions of interpretation, this process also encourages me to consider whether what I do as a 21st-century classical guitarist matters for how we continue in the next century. In sharing my own experience, I anticipate that my peers, other guitarists, performers and composers may identify resonances with their own. The ways different players previously left imprints of their identities set the tone for what texts, people and artifacts are studied and performed today. Now it is up to the next generation of performers, composers and consumers to think critically and act meaningfully on how certain narratives are taught – why some kinds of musical identities are heard, and some are not.

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