

# Archiving the past-related present in the interests of the future: a transmedia history of Glasgow (Jessica's script)

## Pentimento

For Pentimento, I wanted this song to be uncomfortable to listen to, as I found it to be quite grotesque to make a “beautiful” song that is “pleasurable” to listen to, when writing unflinchingly about a literal “portrait of the British Empire”.

Pentimento, in art history, means the reappearance of an earlier drawing that has been painted over – the failing of a cover up. Our song Pentimento is specifically about a painting of the Glassford family, painted by Archibald McLauchlan in 1764-68 who profited off the Slave Trade. There have been debates about whether a young black boy in the background has been painted over – although it has been discovered during restoration that it was not consciously covered, rather the oil paints used for the boy's skin and the back wall in the painting seemed to have darkened into obscurity over time, covered by centuries of dirt. We wanted to use this as an analogy to critique the institutional glossing over of our exploitative colonial history, or the limited telling of civil rights history in schools. This is in response to the anti-racism work that we are doing as academics at Glasgow School of Art and University of Glasgow. <https://glasgowmuseumsslavery.co.uk/2018/08/14/john-glassfords-family-portrait/>

I played indeterminate microtonal slides and harmonics (when the fingers from the left hand lightly touch a string on the fingerboard), and placed the bow delicately near the bridge, barely touching the strings, to produce an ethereal, distant sound. As is common practice in a recording studio, we tried several takes, recording each one onto a new track. I suggested as a joke, lets listen to them all played back at the same time, joking “it could be beautiful” – all the while, thinking that it would be a confusing mess. However, upon listening to it back – we realised it perfectly symbolised the layers of paint, whilst the indeterminate slides generated an ascending and descending, almost as if floating on or drowning in the waves of the Atlantic ocean. This swirling cello cacophony gave the bittersweet country blues-inspired guitar sound and gentle recitation of the lyrics an edge that makes the listener uncomfortable.

We recorded both a field recording of the ambience and an impulse response from the People's Palace where the portrait is exhibited – from impulse response we can generate a bespoke convolution reverberation plugin, to make the cello or a voice sound as if it is echoing within that site.

It would be an immersive, educational experience for the listener, if we insert extracts of field recordings from the sites mentioned in each of the songs, or venues in which we have performed the songs (ideally in stereo so it can be heard without requiring headphones as would be required for binaural recordings). We have already inserted salient archive recordings such as that from shipbuilding worker activist Jimmy Reid on a song called Universal Alienation - “We're not rats, we're human beings”. Beyond the Glassford portrait ambiances, field recordings/archive sounds/foley effects can include:

- Wind over the River Clyde for Owl of Minerva
- Honks and rushing of water, clinking of glasses and smashing of bottles for another song called Steamboat Sundays
- Traffic cacophony, sirens and ambience from Central Station for the song, “Hope Street”

## **fixed and reproducible texts (SONGS) of a rock band / ephemeral and disappearing improvised music**

One side of my practice is the devising an anthology of fixed and “reproducible” texts (Benjamin, 1936) writing a History of Glasgow in 16 Songs with Glam Rock/punk/folk/rock band The Tenementals – to agitate activism for equality through idioms, metaphors and lyrics as protest chants, aired in grassroots venues like The Revelator, a Wall of Death in Glasgow’s ex-shipyards (with Mick Lynch from RMT Union), and in mass spectacles as part of Doors Open Day.

The other side of my practice is free improvisation in ensembles such as Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (also VIR, an ensemble centring women and gender diverse musicians and composers, New String Collective and queer-centred Glasgow Autonomous Collective Orchestra), where music is emergent, ephemeral and disappears as fast as it appears – themes are largely non-repeatable through spontaneous conversations of music from intersecting genres such as jazz, classical and experimental performance art.

In both sides of my practice there is co-creation, collaborative creativity, a weaving and spreading of intergenerational knowledges, music for activism, and mythologizing of minoritized knowledges. In both practices there is also transmission of affect through highly emotional music performance, encouraging “emotional contagion” from performer to audience (Juslin 2011). A form of “spooky action at a distance”.

I shape the cello parts for The Tenementals by improvising to the early demo performances on from Simon, our Lead Guitarist, and David our songwriter and principal singer. We tailor the performance dynamics and enhance the recorded takes with post-production techniques in the studio, to ensure the cello can fit the genre of the song, and speak to the historical context alluded to in the lyrics.

this practice is built upon a foundation of classical cello pedagogy, but equally owes much to my experience of free musical conversations in Glasgow Improvisers’ Orchestra and Australian Art Orchestra, women and gender-diverse led VIR, New String Collective and queer-centred Glasgow Autonomous Collective Orchestra.

In classical pedagogy I learned technically challenging cello solos in high registers full of semiquavers or complex rhythmic motifs for exams; but in symphony orchestras and string quartets, I learned to play the low frequency accompaniment in droning minims and semibreves, as the cello often did not have the main tune! It was a score, or a program of notes.

In free improvisation ensembles and art installation collaborations I learned to listen and respond to my peers in real time as a spontaneous conversation! I would become attuned to their spontaneous gestures, interpret graphic scores and I learned how to impart stage presence through my physical gestures among a loud and disparate ensemble of brass, wind, electronics, techno producers, theatre performers and dancers.

The free improvisation ensembles empowered me to write my own ephemeral musical stories – breaking free from the perfectionist shackles of reciting the work of baroque master composers.

In 2018, I began to blend these two approaches as I figured out my own tune for fixed songs with the Tenementals, and also integrated my sound design experience from my research in ambisonic soundscapes at Glasgow School of Art.

What is quite unique about this approach compared to earlier prog or glam rock with a commissioned session orchestra to play an already composed part for a recording, is that the cello is a permanent member of the band, part of the compositional process, embedded in the recording but also *on stage for every live performance*.

In the Glasgow’s Improvisers Orchestra and other ensembles, I can have a spontaneous musical conversation with a room of players – whilst I do incorporate improvisation for The Tenementals, you will discover that the freedom of improvisation varies from song to song – there is a fixed set of lyrics and chord structure to bend to – for Passionflower’s Lament it was almost as if I improvised to “find” the one and only cello part that was appropriate – whereas for Pentimento, we constructed an ethereal ensemble of several improvised cello takes that would be near impossible to replicate in a live performance.

## Does cello queer a rock band? Gendering musical instruments

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### Rectifying power imbalance in sound

performative gestures and the established gendering of musical instruments – focusing on the electric guitar, the cello and even the theremin.

In both sides of my practice I apply niche and historically-coded instrumentation, using cello and theremin – devices often seen as an outlier to rock and jazz, prompting surprise in new players and audience members. (The Tenementals has rock genealogy using guitars, bass, keys, drums and many vocalists; whereas Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra was founded by seminal free Jazz saxophonists, double bassists, and brass players). The cello, the theremin and my own body and self-hood as a queer, femme-presenting woman are all thought to be outliers to jazz and rock scenes with patriarchal structures at their foundations, and despite efforts in diversifying, misogyny in music can be endemic (UK Parliament 2024) outwith sacred family-like networks (Sappho, 2022). I hope that my developing performance practice, will encourage the audience to interrogate whether gender differences are audible in performance styles, and encourage a critical analysis of the differences between music for recording and playback, as well as awareness the physical demands of musical instrument technologies for neurodivergence and bodies in pain. I will set up these questions by using guitar, cello, theremin, pedals to extend live gestures, with feedback, delay, recording loops and playing back sound live for me to layer and perform with to explore my self-hood and wider gender inequalities in music.

Stars have used guitars, microphone stands (Freddie Mercury) , even their long hair (Beyonce) <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/09/29/new-weave-swing-beyonce-snatching-wigs-via-hair-choreography/> as choreographic props to embody their music in live performance, swishing these props about as if conductors, to emphasise/punctuate musical flourishes.

The physical form of the electric guitar could be seen as a hyperbolic phallic extension and the loud volume shouting out of the amplifier a symbol of male virility, at times obscuring the delicate acoustic instrument such as a cello. In the recording studio we can record each instrument as a solo, so we can have greater control over balance and volume levels within a multi-track session on a digital audio workstation such as ProTools. However, when the band plays live, an acoustic microphone placed in front of a cello can only have its volume at a limited loudness, before it starts to pick up the other dominant electrified instruments on stage, as well as its own amplified sounds through the monitor – if we turn up the acoustic mic on a cello above a certain volume threshold, we get unpredictable feedback. Therefore, whilst the contribution of each of our voices in the band can be equalised in a multi-track recording in a controlled studio environment, when we play live the staging feels more like this - the cellos and womens voices are diminished, overpowered by the guitars. How can we prevent this? As the result can be upsetting to watch, rendering the women performers as tokenistic visual props if their sound cannot be heard. One solution is structuring the songs specifically to have space for the cello – or using an acoustic microphone for the cello for acoustic songs like The Passionflower’s Lament, and then supplementing it with a contact microphone fixed to the cello’s body – to directly send the vibrations on the wood of the cello through an amplifier or direct input into the mixing desk. Affixing a contact microphone to the cello also presents vast opportunities of applying distortion and manipulation with effects pedals.

REFRAIN: The physical form of the electric guitar could be seen as a hyperbolic phallic extension and the loud volume shouting out of the amplifier a symbol of male virility. The Red Hot Chilli Peppers emphasised this by performing wearing only socks, and Elvis gyrated across the stage to the upset of conservative programmers in 1950s America. Some bands almost laugh at the masculinity of rock music, or tease/subvert it through embracing pleasure in flamboyance, such as the pantomimic gestures of Queen. Speaking of pantomime, Bowie was an experienced mime, training under Marcel Marceau protégé Lindsay Kemp, before he became Ziggy Stardust.

The cello has been coded as feminine; for example, “the Bond Girl” (Kara Milovy, played by Maryam d’Abo) in *The Living Daylights* (1987, dir. John Glen) charismatically performs her instrument (before it is impaled with a bullet hole and ridden down a snowy mountain as if a bobsled). Tina Guo has impressive theatricality

with hyper-embodied cello performances, thrashing her body around the stage and contorting her face in a state of ecstasy. She totally steals the show as part of the Hans Zimmer live ensemble.

The theremin is often seen to be played by women which makes me wonder if it is coded as feminine - Clara Rockmore, a violinist who suffered an injury adopted the theremin, Carolina Eyck plays it in symphony orchestras. Dorit Chrysler has created art films on a residency in the CERN Large Hadron Collider, where she costumed the theremin in a wig – very avant-garde! I was thrilled by seeing a subversion of this feminine coding-of theremin – instead it becomes coded as punk and androgynous as Skin from Skunk Anansie at Glastonbury licks, thrashes and smashes her theremin producing an authentic punk wailing.

In Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra's GIOFest XV, the Australian Art Orchestra Creative Music Intensive in 2022, I worked with Daniel and David Wilfred, a song man and didgeridoo player from Ngukurr, Northern Territories, who generously wrote us into their song cycle - we heard Daniel sing in his voice, his father's voice and his son's voice, a song that passes on intimate knowledge of his country; while David directed us to move with his didgeridoo. It was the first time Daniel and David Wilfred had ever seen a theremin being played, and through rehearsing together David placed his hand-dancing in the electromagnetic field of my theremin – a 40,000 year old song cycle from 9000 miles away – being voiced by my theremin, a technology around 100 years old yet, for Westerners often has science-fiction connotations of an intangible future.

Bae Il Dong taught me to extend the voice with Korean Pansori techniques, using graphic imagery from astronomical science and encouraging us to scream into waterfalls; Flamenco bassist Chris Hale taught us to clap without moving our hands, with iterations of Korean Ho-Hup gestures. The residency in the remote Tasmanian Highlands taught me how to play music with the whole body; not just my hands, to play music using memory and story; not just spontaneous impulse in the present.

The cello has an anthropomorphised form – we refer to the neck, the body with an almost hourglass shape. Since I was seven, my grandmother remarked with disdain that the cello is not a “dignified” instrument for a girl to play due to its placement between the legs. Carrying the cello's heavy weight around causes flares of pain in a neurodiverse and sick body. The sounds a cello makes feel like breathy groans, bellowing from the f-holes, or screeching harmonics and sharp bursts near the bridge, standing in for stabs in Hitchcock's Psycho (1960). It was not until I performed with a theremin that I realised I used the cello like a shield to hide behind, and wrap my body around, as a comfort on stage. Whilst I become absorbed in a state of flow playing the theremin, and move my hands, arms, body, legs, in service of the sound – I am still unnerved when audience members imitate my movements as if in a state of trance, demonic possession or weightless suspension in zero gravity.

In Tenementals we try to bridge the gap between the string instrumentation and electric guitars – the cellist becomes a core member of the band, there at the origins of the song writing process and having a constant presence on the stage, equal to the guitarist and bassist. The cello part can be like a mediator between these two registers as cello has the widest range of any string instrument – it has the potential to be stratchy and rough for punk songs, or the capability to build a low frequency fog which counterbalances the mid frequencies of the electric guitar and the high pitches of the female vocal performance. I also believe that including a cello in a rock band, inherently queers it “emphasising pleasure in a world of violence”.

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