

I'M MY OWN MERRY-GO-ROUND: AN ARTISTIC PROJECT DEVOTED TO THE ELECTRIC VIOLA AS A CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL MEDIUM

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1. The project

Not much can be said about the default type of viola. This instrument has no standard size or shape, and every viola looks, sounds, feels, and plays differently—to the extreme! The research question that I am seeking to answer is which one of the possible further ways of the viola could be, the way that has, in accordance with its very special history and constant metamorphosis, led viola to a complete metamorphosis, the electric viola. In this vein, I have started the artistic project *I'm My Own Merry-go-round*, which is devoted to contemporary music and contemporary performance using the electric viola as a primary musical medium. This project has formed the basis for my doctoral thesis.

The project represents an artistic study in music and is mainly a music performance research project. In its essence, the project is based on sounds, research, and sharing; besides my solo work (music-making, experimenting, improvising, studio work, and performance), I collaborate with composers and contemporary artists through workshops and sessions. We try, via immediate communication, to present the creative act of exploring various possibilities of artistic expression through the electric viola.

The research demonstrates a performer-oriented approach, where I am a performer/music-maker and someone who is reflecting upon their creative work. The aim of this research is to make the involved knowledge available to a wider musical and artistic community so it doesn't become a project that has goals focused primarily on my own use.

There is no electric viola in general, no default at all; in this kind of creative process, which starts to take place from the moment of choosing/building an instrument and accessories and continues up to the final performance, the sound capabilities of the electric viola are constantly provoking/evoking the subconscious, creating vast landscapes of expression, exploring, one might say, an undefined endpoint.

2. The instrument

Understanding the specific transitional aspects and phases in the history of bowed string instruments is essential prerequisite for this research.

It has been established that over the last 20 years, tremendous efforts have been made to create various virtual bowed string instruments—from exploring the physical, audio, and tactile qualities of instrumentality with bowed instrument simulations, to complex sound synthesis and programming, and the production of software, interfaces, and controllers that can capture instrumental performance gestures and translate them accordingly into musical expression. While it is impossible to predict how the bowed instruments will look and sound in the future, [...] the reassessment of their present forms and numerous transitive aspects can be nothing but a positive effort. Whether players turn to some of the historical phases of transition or they join the research in the field of contemporary digital instruments, they will enhance their knowledge as well as their instrumental and performance practices and find new, special ways to express personal musical ideas. (Popović 2016)

Electric viola can be defined as a specially designed electroacoustic bowed string instrument. These instruments have existed since the 1930s with design concepts that haven't changed much throughout the century. Electroacoustic string instruments usually have a modular construction: the instrument's body with its transducer (pickup) and the sound amplification are separate units. More intermediary (and interactive) modules that affect the sound can be inserted in the signal chain between these basic units, all resulting in a significantly

different player-instrument relationship in comparison to the traditional acoustic instrument. Since the way we produce, shape, and control the sound on a musical instrument is intertwined with our feedback—how we hear and feel the instrument while playing—this player-instrument feedback loop provides a base for investigating and establishing specialized electric string instrument performance techniques.

My electric viola is actually an augmented, specially designed electroacoustic bowed string instrument—a combination of a physical, custom-made five-string electric instrument of a sticklike/skeletal design and a software instrument using various processing algorithms with internal and external controlling possibilities. In that sense, my “eViola” is also partly a digital/virtual instrument that borrows traditional performance knowledge, techniques, and gestures but also demands the creation and definition of new ones. As I see it, an instrument such as the eViola is truly contemporary music medium, yet still a new and undiscovered interface for musical expression.

3. The player

The atmosphere around bowed string instruments and their makers and players in the nineteenth century provide the birthplace of a mainstream *vintage instrument-centered perspective*. This perspective glorifies traditional orchestral string instruments as a solid constancy and disregards their predecessors as well as new techno-musical tendencies and aspirations. Further on, this perspective of a culturally strong string player community was strengthened by the aggressive investment capitalism of the twentieth century—a common belief is that there’s no better violin than a Stradivarius or Guarneri del Gesu, and their prices back up that opinion. Consequently, for about 100 years or so, string players strove to fulfill certain sound expectations on their beloved instruments, and the professional scrutiny of tone quality matters has become infamous.

While electric string instruments appeared as a natural phase in bowed string instruments’ transition/evolution, they were generally not perceived as such and therefore live in parallel worlds, mostly hidden from classical players. However, the new instruments resonated well with jazz, blues, and rock musicians. The position of a traditionally educated and trained player interested in an electric or digital string instrument is pretty unfavorable. Such endeavor requires, among other things, the readiness and capacity to gain knowledge by crossing boundaries between seeming opposites: classical and non-classical, art and pop, artist and researcher, artist and technician/engineer, performer and music-maker, etc.

Discovering the eViola constantly broadens my research areas and calls for an inter- and multidisciplinary approach. In a way, I’m combining such roles as interpreter, performer, improviser, music-maker, researcher, co-author, arranger, audio engineer, technician, and music producer. As a part of the *I’m My Own Merry-go-round* project, music-making has mainly an idiosyncratic purpose, but it’s also a research area. Living with and dealing with a technologically augmented instrument creates a very specific and unique sense and feeling for that medium/interface. Nurturing that feeling deepens the need for practical experimentation, and through improvisation, it drives creativity in certain directions. Thus, through such creative work, new sound possibilities and new performance techniques are created. It is a musical and corporeal experience, passionate and addictive. Searching, improvising, experimenting and all sorts of musicking¹ with the eViola can also lead to a build-up of various sound studies that expand knowledge about the instrument possibilities that can be further used by players and composers. Sometimes, it is, in a way, backward programming: focusing or restricting yourself to certain technical areas of instrumentality drives the creative processes by using the instrument as a starting point and a main tool of creativity.

¹ Term *musicking* is used as defined by Christopher Small.

I am much inspired by the eViola, yet I know that the majority of my audience is not aware of the knowledge underlying the music and that complexity of technical/technological actions or procedures in music does not always guarantee overall artistic quality. I'm investigating ways to make this project more open to the public and to involve even more people, but for now it looks like it is to be mainly a one-man journey. As my own merry-go-round, I have kept turning for years, pondering many ideas and continuing to listen, research, play and comprehend music in accordance with its multifaceted nature that I continue to discover. One thing is certain: playing the eViola, and being open to everything that is moving speakers' membranes, introduced me to a whole new and different world of musical experience and to a special, deeper understanding of my own music.

4. The recital

The recital program consists mainly of pieces derived from collaborations with composers. All compositions/performance plans were revisited several times after premiere performances, so a DIP audience has the opportunity to hear the newest readings/editions for the first time.

A detailed program of the recital:

Rastko Popović (1983) and Morgan Juel Stavik (1980)
Suburban Summer Dream, radiophonic miniature for eViola and tape

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767)
Canons mélodieux - I. Sonata en duo a 'eViole' (arr. and electronics R. Popović)
Vivace - Adagio - Allegro

Craig Farr (1975)
Žuta podmornica, for eViola and tape

Goran Marinković (1962)
{4} + 1 = 2, for eViola in five parts

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