WAITING FOR GANDHARVA
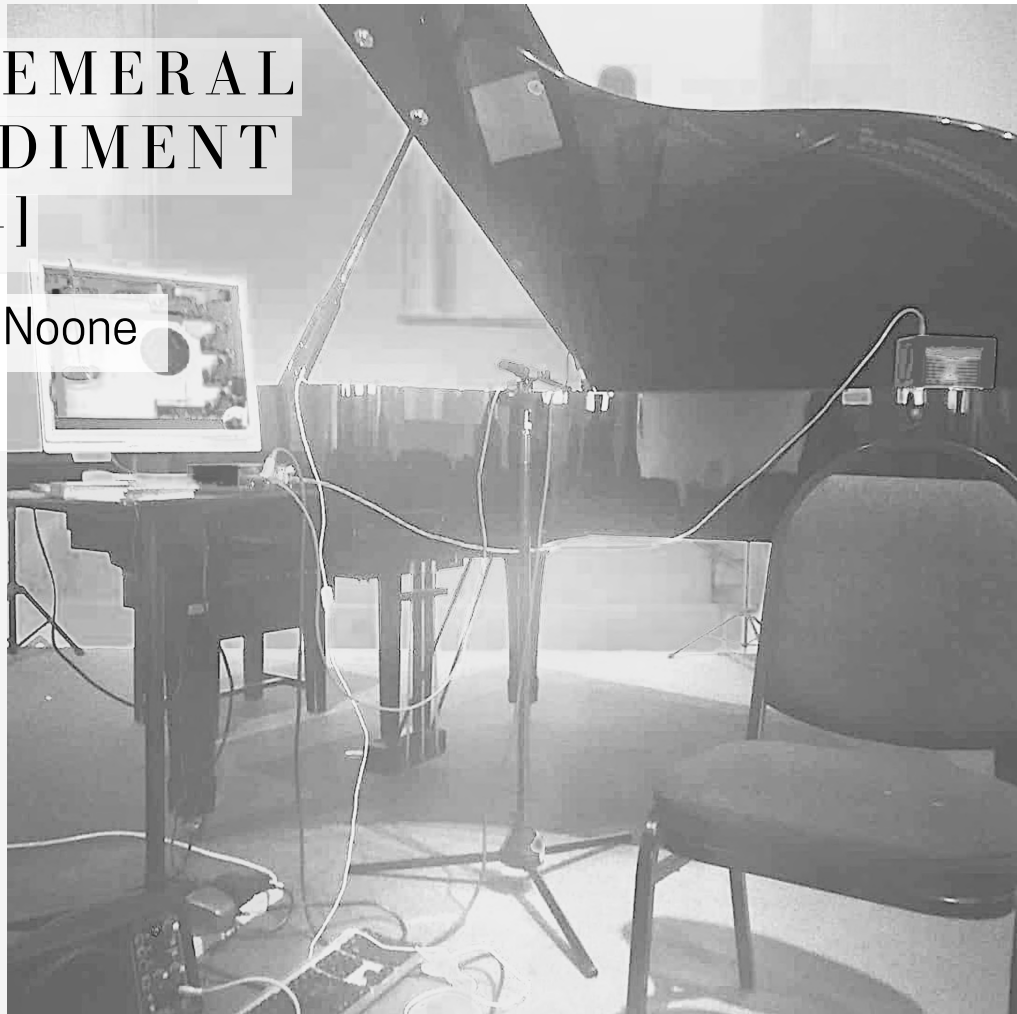
[THE EPHEMERAL DISEMBODIMENT OF BEING]

Matthew James Noone

| ESTRAGON: | Charming spot. |
	Inspiring prospects. [He turns to Vladimir]
	Let's go.
VLADIMIR:	We can't.
ESTRAGON:	Why not?
VLADIMIR:	We're waiting for Godot
ESTRAGON:	[despairingly] Ah! [Pause]
	You're sure it was here?

'Waiting for Gandharva', a composition for piano, feedback and electronics, is an exploration of the ephemeral and disembodied nature of using technology to make music. The title, 'Waiting for Gandharva', is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Samuel Beckett's most famous existential work, Waiting for Godot, and also the Hindu celestial musical beings known as Gandharva. The composition employs electronic manipulation of the acoustic sound of the piano using two microphones, a single-board microcomputer and a battery-operated mini amplifier.

In this article, I document the genesis of the composition and my anxiety about giving up some of the creative autonomy in my practice to a computer. My reflections here focus on the first disastrous (non)performance of the piece in which the entire concert program had to be abandoned due to a computer malfunction.

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VLADIMIR:    What do we do now?
ESTRAGON:    Wait.
VLADIMIR:    Yes, but while waiting.
ESTRAGON:    What about hanging ourselves?
VLADIMIR:    Hmm. It'd give us an erection!
ESTRAGON:    In the meantime let us try and converse
             calmly, since we are incapable of
             keeping silent.
VLADIMIR:    You're right, we're inexhaustible.
ESTRAGON     It's so we won't think.
VLADIMIR:    We have that excuse.
ESTRAGON:    It's so we won't hear.
VLADIMIR     We have our reasons.
ESTRAGON     All the dead voices.
VLADIMIR:    They make a noise like wings.
ESTRAGON:    Like leaves.
VLADIMIR:    Like sand.
ESTRAGON:    Like leaves
                    [Silence]
```

Riffs
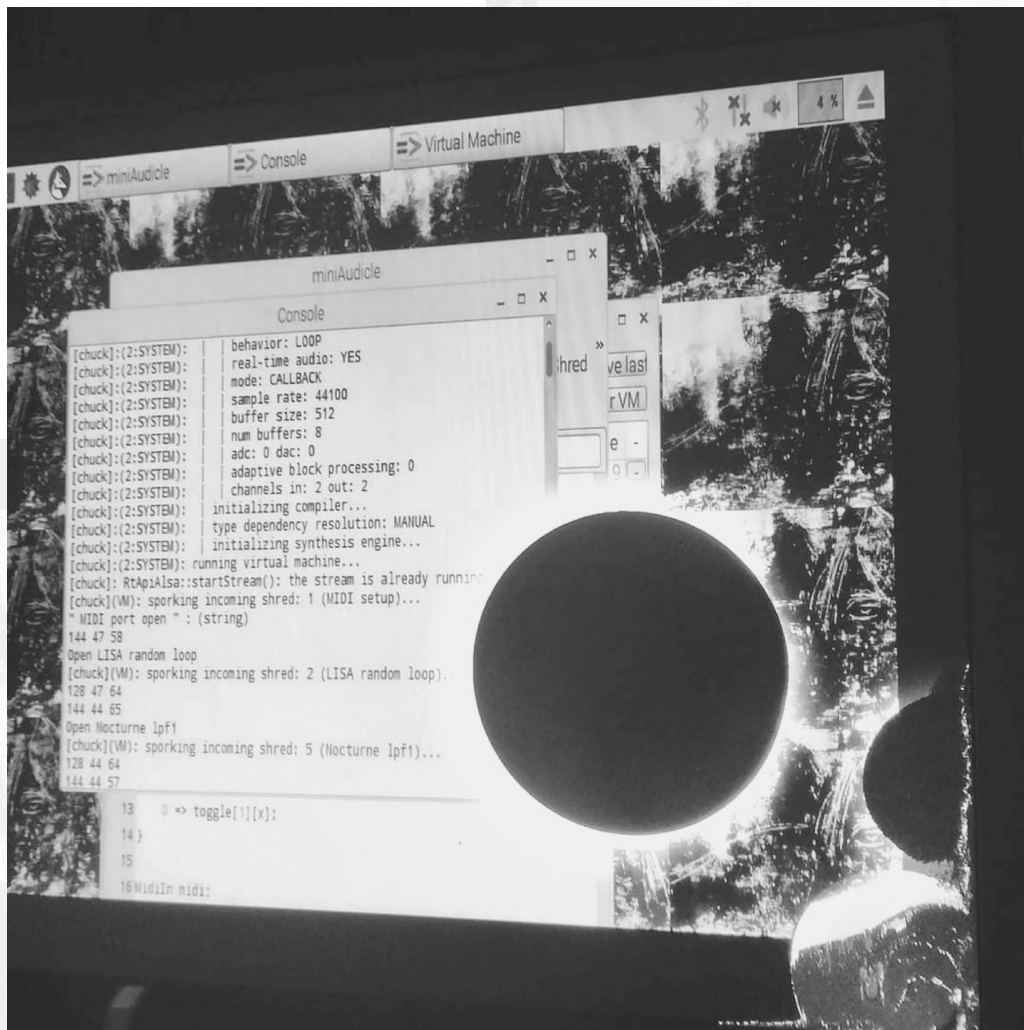
Truth be told, I've always been suspicious of using computers for music. Growing up playing rock, blues and indie guitar music, I never saw the computer as a valid music-making tool. To me, computers were un-feeling machines, cold and clinical devices of abstract thinking. In my musical world, computerised sound was the opposite of what music was all about: that ephemeral but embodied quality of 'tone'. I believe that the quest for tone is an encapsulation of the human struggle: imagine BB King searching for ultimate expression of the blues in just one bent note; Kurt Cobain screaming his throat ragged over three chord power pop; Hendrix cajoling swirling feedback from his amps. These are the sounds of catharsis that spoke to my teenage existential angst.

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ESTRAGON:     [Feebly] Help me!
VLADIMIR:     It hurts?
OESTROGEN:    Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!
VLADIMIR:     [Angrily] No one ever suffers but
```

By the late 1990's, petulant guitar music was all over the mainstream. It had become corporate, sanitised and generic. Suddenly, playing guitar didn't feel so cathartic. The most 'punk' choice was to make electronica. Like many of my peers, I sold my guitars and bought old drum machines and samplers, distorting them through guitar pedals with loads of saturated feedback. It was an extension of a 'beautiful noise' aesthetic of rock and an attempt to subvert the cold and 'non-human' sound of the machine.

```
VLADIMIR:     This is awful!
ESTRAGON:     Sing something.
VLADIMIR:     No, no! [He reflects]
              We could start all over again perhaps.
ESTRAGON:     That should be easy.
VLADIMIR:     It's the start that's difficult.
ESTRAGON:     You can start from anything.
VLADIMIR:     Yes, but you have to decide.
 ESTRAGON:    True.
```

By the turn of the millennium, even electronica had become mainstream. For many years, I gave up performing music altogether. Around this time, I became a Zen Buddhist. My musical practice involved whacking wooden blocks with dimpled mallets, chiming bells and listening to the sound of my blood, sinews and bones. My Buddhist practice eventually led me to India on pilgrimage. After only a month, I clashed with the head monk in a zen temple in Bodh Gaya. He wouldn't allow me to play a small flute in my room of the evening. I promptly abandoned my utopian spiritual quest.

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                       [Silence]
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Through chance and circumstance, in early 2003 I attended my first concert of Indian classical music at the Dover Lane Music Program in Kolkata. I was immediately converted. For the next decade, I studied Indian classical music with Sougata Roy Chowdhury and K. Sridhar in Kolkata and the UK. My main instrument became the fretless twenty-five stringed lute called sarode. Here was an instrument and a musical system that were constructed around tone, feeling and raw emotion. I felt like I had found my musical home.

```
VLADIMIR:     When you seek you hear.
ESTRAGON:     You do.
VLADIMIR:     That prevents you from finding.
ESTRAGON:     It does.
VLADIMIR:     That prevents you from thinking.
ESTRAGON:     You think all the same.
```

For many years, I became the North Indian classical music guy and I was obsessed with all things raga. My gurus taught me that music was predominantly a spiritual practice in which the musician and listener can achieve transcendence. In Indian music philosophy, certain tones or pitches are understood to activate energy centres in the body and appease celestial beings. These beings, known as Gandharva, are omniscient, always listening, waiting and receptive. In this cosmology, non-musical sounds, especially sounds that are not acoustic, are considered disruptive to the harmonic order of the universe. I was sold and quickly became an enthusiastic zealot.

```
VLADIMIR:     Christ! What's Christ got to do with it?
              You're not going to compare yourself to
              Christ!
ESTRAGON:     All my life I've compared myself to him
VLADIMIR:     But where he lived it was warm and dry.
ESTRAGON:     Yes. And they crucified quick.
```

My teachers bestowed their blessings on me to begin performing. Soon after I settled in the West of Ireland. In my newfound musical fervour, I imagined a world where pop music no longer existed. Everyone would spend their time sitting on the floor listening to Indian music. All the pubs in Ireland would serve chai and burn incense. I was the purest of the pure, on a mission from God.

```
VLADIMIR:      Say, I am happy.
ESTRAGON:      I am happy.
VLADIMIR:      So am I.
ESTRAGON:      So am I.
VLADIMIR:      We are happy.
ESTRAGON:      We are happy.

               [Silence]
```

After a while, I had a creeping feeling of doubt about the veracity of my fundamentalist position. I was a white, middle-class Australian male trying to perform Indian classical music in rural Ireland. While I had a deep love for Indian classical music (and some level of proficiency in the performance of it), I had to admit that I would always suffer from 'duck in the henhouse' syndrome. Aubert uses the 'duck' analogy to explain how foreign performers of Indian classical music are 'constantly susceptible to being questioned, even judged as suspicious' (1). No matter how enthusiastic or competent I was as a performer of Indian classical music, I could never claim to fully belong to the Indian tradition. I would always be both inside and outside it at the same time. I discovered that this conflict of identity was common amongst other foreigners studying Indian classical music (2). Many were having similar experiences to me, trying to find ways to integrate Indian music with their own sense of cultural self.

Riffs

```
VLADIMIR:     Calm yourself, calm yourself.
ESTRAGON:     You and your landscapes! Tell me
              about the worms!
```

In 2012, I decided to immerse myself in Irish traditional music. Over four years, as part of an arts practice PhD, I explored how to adapt Irish traditional music for the sarode. In the process, I slowly but surely found ways to integrate myself into the world of traditional music. I even toured India with several Irish musicians (3). However, in terms of my identity, things were getting even weirder. I was now a white, middle-class (and middle-aged) Australian guy playing Irish traditional music on an Indian instrument.

```
VLADIMIR:     Why doesn't he put down his bags?
ESTRAGON:     Rubbish!
```

Rather than being troubled by this lack of clear musical identity, I embraced it, re-imagining myself as a musical 'mongrel'(4), acknowledging and celebrating the power of inter-cultural complexity. The mongrel has a special role in inter-cultural exchange and a unique kind of strength or 'hybrid vigor' (5). Embracing my mixed musical pedigree was challenging, but also liberating. Reclaiming my mongrel identity helped to rekindle a connection with my rock n roll soul, which had long been subdued. 'Hey Indian music guy', it said, 'Let's fuck shit up.'

```
VLADIMIR:     Then all the dogs came running
                  And dug the dog a tomb.

         [He stops, broods. Softly]
```

In 2018, I was awarded an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship to research 'mongrelity' in musical composition. My aim was to put flesh on the bones of the 'mongrel' concept. The plan was to compose three new works in collaboration with three composers who also displayed some 'mongrel' traits (6).

```
VLADIMIR:      Oh pardon!
ESTRAGON:      Carry on.
VLADIMIR:      No no, after you.
ESTRAGON:      On the contrary.
               [They glare at each other]
VLADIMIR:      Ceremonious ape!
ESTRAGON:      Punctilious pig!
VLADIMIR:      Finish your phrase, I tell you!
ESTRAGON:      Finish your own!
               [Silence. They draw closer, halt]
VLADIMIR:      Moron!
ESTRAGON:      That's the idea, let's abuse each other
```

I used these collaborations as opportunities to explore both my fascination with, and distrust of, computer-manipulated sound. I worked with the composer and pianist Ryan Molloy to create 'Waiting for Gandharva'. The piece was an attempt to bring together my disparate musical identities in a single composition. 'Waiting for Gandharva' is how I imagine it might sound inside a sarode if it was connected up to a Marshall stack and played by John Cage (or, perhaps, what it sounds like to be inside some dark recess of my own head).

```
VLADIMIR:      All I know is that the hours are long,
               under these  conditions, and constrain
               us to beguile them with  proceedings
               which - how shall I say - which may at
               first sight seem reasonable, until they
               become a habit. You may say it is to
               prevent our reason from  foundering. No
               doubt. But has it not long been straying
               in the night without end of the abysmal
               depths? That's what I sometimes wonder.
               You follow my reasoning?
ESTRAGON:      We are all born mad. Some remain so.
```

Waiting for Gandharva

MATTU NOONE
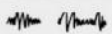
PERFORMANCE DIRECTIONS

Technical Details

- This piece involves electronic manipulation of the acoustic sound of the piano using two microphones situated inside the body of the instrument.
- These microphones are routed through a USB interface and into a small Rasberry Pi(microcomputer) which is running a programme called CHUCK.
- CHUCK is programmed with 8 different pieces of code which effect the acoustic sound of the piano in different ways. Primarily, these pieces of code record//playback// loop the sound of the piano while also manipulating the sound with different effects such as delay// reverb// granular synthesis// random functions.
- These 8 pieces of code are triggered by using a MIDI keypad by the performer. This is signified by the symbols L1 L2 L3 L4 L5 L6 L7 L8
- The electronically manipulated sounds are then sent to a small amplifier which is situated inside the piano.
- The purpose of these loops is to gradually build up sonic density until the point of feedback.
- The electronic element of the composition could be replicated using other software and hardware.
- When the amplifier starts feeding back this is the cue for the performer to press another MIDI keypad which gradually fades out the piano loops.
- The piece finishes with the acoustic material of the score.

Breathing

- The symbol ⌢ indicates a non-audible breath (inhalation//exhalation) before playing the next phrase. Suggested durations are given in the score. The purpose of these breathe marks are temporal guidelines as well as an invitation for the performer to become more conscious of their own state of being which will naturally impact on the outcome of the performance.

Harmonic material

- All harmonic material is indefinite (non-octave specific) unless specified.
- The following symbol ⋀⋀ ⋀⋀ ⋀⋀ .indicates scratching the string inside the piano using the fingernail in a sustained manner.

In 'Waiting for Gandharva' the acoustic resonance of the piano is amplified using distortion and feedback. This is achieved through live sampling using the coding software, ChucK. The computer-processed sounds were then played through a small battery-powered amplifier placed inside the piano. The code patches were based around random looping, long delays and reverbs. Drawing inspiration from my Zen days, the timing of the piece relies primarily on the breathing patterns of the performer. The score includes instructions for breath durations between each melodic phrase. Inspired by structures of improvisation in Indian classical music, the piece uses limited pitch material clustered around the tonic and the third note of the scale (7). It reaches its conclusion with a saturation of feedback and noise.

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'Waiting for Gandharva" (2019)

```
ESTRAGON:    So long as one knows.
VLADIMIR:    One can bide one's time.
ESTRAGON:    One knows what to expect.
VLADIMIR:    No further need to worry.
ESTRAGON:    Simply wait.
```

As part of my research fellowship commitments, 'Waiting for Gandharva' was scheduled to be performed as part of a lunchtime recital at the University of Maynooth in April 2019. Everything worked perfectly in the sound check. My decision to create an electro-acoustic composition using coding software seemed validated. The mixture of acoustic piano, computer granualized loops and lo-fi distortion created a sound world that I found very satisfying. I felt like I had finally made something good.

```
VLADIMIR:    Well?
ESTRAGON:    Nothing.
VLADIMIR:    Show.
ESTRAGON:    There's nothing to show.
             Try to put it on again.
```

After the soundcheck, final preparations were made in the hall. Programme notes were printed and left on chairs, and a small, expectant and curious audience gathered slowly. After formal introductions were made, the pianist took his place at the piano, paused, and clicked on the MIDI pad to begin the premiere performance of 'Waiting for Gandharva'

[No response]
[A few minutes of hushed discussion]
[Rearranging of leads]
[Banging on the keyboard]
[Reopening the software]
[Turning it off and turning it on]
[To no avail]
[Waiting for Gandharva could not be performed]

```
VLADIMIR:     Charming evening we're having.
ESTRAGON:     Unforgettable.
VLADIMIR:     And it's not over.
ESTRAGON:     Apparently not.
VLADIMIR:     It's only the beginning.
ESTRAGON:     It's awful.
VLADIMIR:     Worse than the pantomime.
```

After the embarrassing failure of 'Waiting for Gandharva's' premiere, it took several days of troubleshooting to figure out what had gone wrong. In the end, I have to admit, it was primarily human error (8).

```
VLADIMIR:     Well? What do we do?
ESTRAGON:     Don't let's do anything. It's safer.
VLADIMIR:     Let's wait and see what he says.
```

Performing with computers, just like with any musical instrument, involves practice, a degree of struggle and (sometimes) accepting imperfection. This imperfection can be either machine- or (perhaps more often) human-made. The relationship between instrument, body and music making lies at 'the core of most music cultures' (9). I don't have this kind of embodied relationship with computers. I wonder how many people do.

```
VLADIMIR:     Tell me to think.
ESTRAGON:     What?
VLADIMIR:     Say, Think pig!
ESTRAGON:     Think pig!
              [Silence]
VLADIMIR:     I can't.
ESTRAGON:     That's enough of that.
VLADIMIR:     Tell me to dance.
ESTRAGON:     I'm going.
```

The problem of (dis)embodiment and computer music has been discussed at length in academic discourse (10). A recurring point of reflection in this discourse is human-computer interaction and the notion of 'interface' (11). Some scholars argue that, in any instrumental practice, the smooth interface is ultimately 'a chimera, the pursuit of which can lead to frustrated expectations' (12). Musical instruments are in fact 'characterised by a resistance to the smooth interface' and are 'often uncompromising when it comes to a potential merge with the human' (13). Rather than trying to hide it, perhaps the answer is to embrace this disjuncture, to "claim the cut, work on the seam, not to blur it away, but to appropriate and promote it" (14).

```
ESTRAGON:    I'm hungry.
VLADIMIR:    Do you want a carrot?
ESTRAGON:    Is that all there is?
VLADIMIR:    I might have some turnips.
ESTRAGON:    Give me a carrot.
```

The appropriation and acknowledgement of disjuncture has a parallel with my concept of musical mongrelity. Mongrelity is a moving between worlds of the sensual, cerebral, visceral, messy and sometimes contradictory reality of being a musician in the postmodern world.

Likewise, human-computer interaction is not smooth, nor need it be. Our relationships with musical instruments are not always harmonious. Rather, instrumental performance practice involves struggle, patience and perseverance. It is the embracing of this struggle that makes the performance of music such a captivating human experience. Arguably, there is something beautiful and very human about the vulnerability and fragility of human-computer interaction.

```
VLADIMIR:    How's the carrot?
ESTRAGON:    It's a carrot.
VLADIMIR:    So much the better, so much the better.
```

I don't really view computer-based music as either inherently bad or intrinsically good. Using computers as a music-making tool simply provides opportunities for reflection and questioning. Working with computer-manipulated sound in performance can help us challenge binary constructs: the ephemeral and the embodied; the clinical and the spiritual; the pure and the mongrel. The frustration of using a computer to make music also offers poignant opportunities for empathy through self reflection and an acceptance of our human foibles.

```
ESTRAGON:    Well? Shall we go?
VLADIMIR:    Pull on your trousers.
ESTRAGON:    What?
VLADIMIR:    Pull on your trousers.
ESTRAGON:    You want me to pull on my trousers?
VLADIMIR:    Pull on your trousers.
ESTRAGON:    [realizing his trousers are down] True.
             [He pulls up his trousers]
```

I still don't know if I will ever completely embrace the computer as a performance tool. However, I am intrigued enough by the questions to wait and see what happens.

```
VLADIMIR:    Well? Shall we go?
ESTRAGON:    Yes, let's go.
             (They do not move)
             CURTAIN
```

Matthew James Noone is an Australian-Irish ex-indie rocker, improviser, thinker, composer and performer of the 25 stringed lute known as the sarode. He has studied North Indian Classical music for over a decade with Sougata Roy Chowdhury in Kolkata and more recently with UK based sarodiya, K. Sridhar. He has performed Indian classical music across the globe and composes in a diverse range of disciplines from Irish traditional music, free improvisation and contemporary electroacoustic music. Matthew is an Irish Research Council scholar and was awarded a PhD for his work exploring the performance of Irish music on the sarode. He has published numerous articles on topics ranging from world music, phenomenology, Irish studies, arts research and popular music. He is currently undertaking a postdoctoral research fellowship investigating electroacoustic composition and hybridity at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick.

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Endnotes
1. Aubert (2017: 82)
2. Noone (2013)
3. See 'Sound of a Country' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8kPUDbEzck
4. Noone (2016)
5. Kapchan and Strong 1999
6. Mel Mercier (sound art/ Irish music/ theatre/ gamelan), Ryan Molloy (Irish traditional and Western classical music) and Dan Trueman (hardanger fiddle/ electronics/ western composition/ digital instrument design)
7. In this version, the tonic is A.
8. I had put a volume envelope function into the MIDI pad code that was operated by a button. I didn't realise that the button had been activated during the soundcheck, which meant the envelope was always on. It simply had to be pressed again and was reset, allowing sound to come through.
9. Rebelo (2006: 27)
10. Featherstone and Burrows (1995); Khan and Seifert (2007); Hajdu (2017)
11. Stowel et al (2009); Cook (2017)
12. Coyne et al (2004: 440)
13. Coyne et al (2004: 433)
14. Coyne et al (2004: 44

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