

**“Taste is the Great Enemy”:  
An Interview with Ben Grossman**

**Conducted and Transcribed by Paul Watkins**

**PW:** I’m here with Ben Grossman. He is a musician, composer, and improviser living in Guelph, Ontario. Having been exposed to a gamut of music from a young age, he spent his youth building homemade synthesizers, effects and tape loops and playing electric guitar in his parents’ suburban basement and with various groups in warehouses around Toronto. Through percussion and his interest in non-equal tuning systems, Ben became involved in the study, performance, and recording of traditional Turkish, Arabic, Irish, Balkan, and French music. In 1997 he studied Turkish music in Istanbul, and since taking up the *vielle a roue*, aka, the hurdy gurdy, he has done workshops and lessons with some of the most renowned artists working in contemporary and creative music today.

Ben has over 80 CD credits, and has performed and recorded with many ensembles over the years. In the past he’s toured with Loreena McKennitt while continuing to work on other projects, developing a solo performance practice and working in improvised, ad-hoc ensembles. His first solo album, *Macrophone* was released in 2007 and features a unique two CD form for simultaneous, aleatoric playback. I’ve seen Ben, as many others have here in Guelph, perform numerous times and have always been captivated by his performances, particularly on the hurdy gurdy, which before I saw you perform, I don’t think I’d ever seen the instrument. Particularly in the way you were using it.

I thought I’d open up our conversation by asking you about your primary instrument, the hurdy gurdy, which is a contemporary, electro-

acoustic instrument with roots in the European Middle Ages. Through extended techniques, live-looping, and processing, I’ve seen you use it as a physical interface into improvised sound creation, spontaneous composition, and the exploration of acoustics, form, and extended aesthetics. I’ve also heard you play a lot of traditional music. What drew you to the hurdy gurdy? Happenstance? It’s this really old and specialized instrument, and yet you do all sorts of contemporary and innovative stuff with it—or perhaps it has always been an innovative instrument.

**BG:** Yep, I think it probably always has been. It’s an instrument that never really completely disappeared, like other instruments have disappeared, and have been revived. It certainly has had its ups and downs. In terms of it being an old instrument, I think in some ways it’s actually a fairly new instrument in the history of Western music. It’s only 800 or 900 years old, compared to say fiddles and harps, which you can trace 1000s of years. Flutes and drums: countless of thousands of years before that. It’s kind of a gadget. It’s an invention of the European mind, 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, or maybe even as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century. And it appears to have been designed and built first in Europe,

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which again is a little unusual, because most of the instruments we consider Western instruments are originally Middle Eastern or North African in origin if you go back far enough. Although, of course the principle of the bowed string is Middle Eastern in origin and the hurdy gurdy is fundamentally a bowed string instrument. But it has a wheel instead of a bow—that becomes a kind of continuous infinite bow. And it has keys instead of a fingerboard. The keys theoretically provide a certain kind of precision in the sounding of a particular tone in the melody string. In reality, they don’t really provide much precision at all. There’s still a lot of touch and a lot of feel involved in getting a particular sound. Or, more

interestingly perhaps is finding the sounds in between the keys, or different ways to move from one tone to another on the keyboard. In addition, there are a number of other strings that provide a kind of drone sound at least in traditional playing, and often instruments have synthetic strings as well. But you can certainly buy an instrument today that is modeled on early instruments, the folklore instruments from other parts of the world. The instrument I play is a contemporary instrument and has features that have continued to develop since the early '80s. But in terms of my interest in it... as you mentioned, my background is in electronics and experimental music from quite a young age—tape loops, and what you could do with synthesizers and found objects—and I got really interested in traditional and early music. And I'm sure I came across the hurdy gurdy first on some recording of early traditional music. I was lucky enough to have some hurdy gurdy mentors in Toronto who got me going with the instrument, which is really important. It's not an instrument you can just pick up and play. There's a lot of fiddling and adjusting.

**PW:** I couldn't go to Long & McQuade [Canada's biggest music store] and say, "I would like to look at your hurdy gurdy section?"

**BG:** "Your finest hurdy gurdy, sir." Unfortunately, no, I wish you could. It would make life a lot easier for everyone if a factory in China was cranking them out by the millions. It's still an instrument that is made for the most part by hand by individual luthiers, sometimes in small woodshops, which means they are very expensive. So it's also a case of economies of scale. For a luthier working by him or herself who is making a 8-10 instruments a year then of course there is a lot of time an energy going into making an instrument. They're more expensive than I wish they were. A lot of people come up to me and want to know about playing the

"... here is an instrument that is acoustic, but gave me an entry in the world of sound and the hands-on manipulation of sound that I was really interested in."

instrument and the biggest challenge initially is just finding one and then paying for it—cause they're expensive. But I was intrigued by the sound and these mentors in Toronto got me going on the instrument, but also introduced me to some contemporary players, especially Valentin Clastrier who's an amazing musician and composer who pushed the technique and technology of the instrument incredibly far in the course of the last 30 years. He's put out a few albums, and does a lot of concerts, mostly around Europe, but he is an amazing musician and an incredible technician on the instrument and has broadened the horizons of the instrument, not just for contemporary players, but it has affected traditional players as well.

And that opened my mind and made me realize that here is an instrument that is acoustic, but gave me an entry in the world of sound and the hands-on manipulation of sound that I was really interested in. To me it was more direct and more immediate than working with modular synthesizers, or tape loops, which is very direct too, compared to computers.

**PW:** It's very tactile.

**BG:** Yes, it's very tactile and it's a feeling of instant feedback cause it's still an acoustic instrument. So, you feel the string and you feel the body moving and there's a directness to the way you relate to the instrument.

**PW:** There's almost an electronic sound to the instrument.

**BG:** Even when it's not plugged in. I think because of the roundness of the wheel it can create a consistency of tone that is very unusual in acoustic instruments. The only other acoustic instrument that can do that—that I can think of—is the organ. With the accordion you come to the end of bells and you have to stop and return. I don't know too many... maybe the glass harmonica. With the rotating glass bowls that are played by rubbing. There's a real purity

to the sound that definitely sounds similar to electronics.

**PW:** You mentioned a few of the teachers you had. I wonder if you could maybe touch on some of your other musical influences, particularly who are you listening to now? I mean, I'm sure you are taking in all new sounds, locally and internationally, analogue, digital—but is there a current artist that stands out for you in particular? That pushes you further out? Maybe it's a community.

Or perhaps, such specificity is antithetical to your musical process. You have a quote on your website from Marcel Duchamp that says, "Taste is the great enemy."

**BG:** Well, that's a bit of a manifesto for me. I believe that artistic taste or aesthetic taste is extremely limiting. And, as you soon as you choose to declare your allegiance to something you by default close yourself off from other things and I think that's really a shame. So,

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apropos to what you just asked, I listen to all kinds of things. I don't even know where to begin. I run this concert series, Silence, and I get to hear a lot of incredible musicians and they inspire me all the time when I run the shows with them. I just did a series of shows with a viola da gamba player from Montreal named Pierre-Yves Martel. And as I was just discussing with someone earlier, Pierre is one of those musicians that I always feel extremely inspired by when I play. If I do a show with him I come away thinking new thoughts about music and sound and excited about trying new things with my instrument or with music generally. That's a very contemporary influence. In terms of my thinking, there are some things I keep going back to. Certainly, David Tudor has been a huge influence on my thinking. Also, James Tenney also an enormous influence. I still read his writings and listen to his music all the time.

John Hassall, I suppose as well. My friend here in Guelph, Gary Diggins put it really well when he was talking about Jon Hassel's approach to the trumpet and how John has taken an instrument that traditionally has had a really strong voice and brash, and the word that Gary used was Yang, in the sense of Chinese philosophy, and he's tried to make it Yin. Make it more feminine, softer to find different shades of the instrument and different parts of its range. And I realize that's a big part of what I've been doing with the hurdy gurdy for years. The hurdy gurdy is a big brash, strong, strident instrument. Even an outdoor kind of sound. And there's this whole beautiful world of small, subtle sounds of the instrument that are really, really interesting to me. And of course the writings of Cage, and

the modal theories of Olivier Messiaen, Pauline Oliveros: both her deep listening work, but also her early electronic music I find incredibly interesting. There's lots really. Tony Conrad. Yeah, lots of things. And Steve Reich, and lots of really interesting things that I've been listening to for years.

**PW:** So, it's a lifelong project?

**BG:** It's a bit of a lifelong project. And the new things come. I'm very excited by resurgence in modular synthesis. Both the varieties that are available and the type of equipment and the kind of work that is coming out as a result of it. Some work is less interesting, and some work is more interesting. The fact that these things are now more accessible. Just as you were alluding to, it makes think what would happen if hurdy gurdies were more accessible and if there was more people playing them? There would be tons of more interesting work?

**PW:** Have you ever tried to build a hurdy gurdy?

**BG:** My very first hurdy gurdy was one I built myself, because I couldn't afford to buy one.

There was a kit and I built the kit and it was horrible. And I sort of took it apart and rebuilt it and rebuilt it about 5 or 6 times and turned it into an almost playable instrument. At least as far as I could take it. But it was still a source of frustration for me. And it came a point, where I thought, I'm either gonna give this whole business up, or I'm going to buy a proper instrument and take it a little more seriously. And that's when I bought my first instrument from Wolfgang Weichselbaumer, a builder in Vienna with whom I've had a relationship with. He's a bit of a mentor too, a real inspiration—how he approaches the instrument.

**PW:** So did you travel to Vienna?

**BG:** Yeah, I spoke with him... I think this was before email. But I started talking with him about the instrument and I travelled there to pick it up and had adjustments made to it on the spot. It's an instrument I wouldn't feel comfortable shipping. It's an instrument that's not mass produced, so each one is very personable so it makes a lot of sense to work directly with the builder and make adjustments and make the sounds that you want.

**PW:** Have you ever encountered a hurdy gurdy app, and what would that sound like?

**BG:** [Laughs].

**PW:** Would that offend you?

**BG:** No, it wouldn't offend me, I just don't think it would be very interesting. I guess like a lot of acoustic instruments what is really interesting is all the variability—the playing technique. You know, electronics are great for electronic things, for sampling, or pure tones, or things that are beyond human abilities on acoustic instruments to create. It's not something I'm interested in, but it would be pretty funny.

**PW:** It would be funny. Maybe there's an app there...

**BG:** There is a couple of Gamelan apps with a full set of Pelog instruments from somewhere in Java that let's you sort of play all the instruments by tapping, but you can't do the muting, which is actually really important in Gamelan playing. But it also teaches you—you can learn to decipher notation. So there's a couple pieces, and you can go and learn to read the notation, which is pretty fun. So it has its uses.

**PW:** Earlier you had mentioned the Silence space: it's this project and multimedia performance space that you've been curating. It's what people have been calling the new and exciting portal in Guelph for sound adventurous and innovative sound events. Silence includes a monthly concert series, occasional improvisation sessions, and handmade music nights and workshops. The music covers a wide range of music, and it speaks to our own interest in music. Everything from ambient music, to installations and sound art, computer music, post rock and psych, and a healthy surplus of the unexpected. In fact, I feel this space embodies ethnomusicologist Christopher Small's definition of *musicking*. I don't know if you've come across this term. For Small, and me, and I assume you, music is not a "fixed" product. I agree with Christopher Small's assertion, in *Musicking*, that "There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do." Small goes on to define *musicking* in this way: "*To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing [...] or by dancing.*"

So, I wonder if you want to speak to Small's definition of *musicking* in relation to the Silence space. I'll just start by asking, what prompted you to start this series?

**BG:** It started as a concert series and became a space later. If I'm perfectly honest, the urge was pretty much completely selfish. I moved from Toronto to Guelph about seven years ago and was finding I was missing a community of

contemporary and experimental and improvised music makers. I would liked to have seen community spaces built around spaces [in Toronto] like Somewhere There, or Tranzac, Array Music, or Holy Oak. There's a bunch of others that have come and gone. And then larger music organizations like Soundstreams, concerts, and Spree Orchestra, and all these sorts of things. There's nothing like that in Guelph. We have the bi-annual Open Ears Festival in Kitchener, which is a fantastic festival. We have, of course, the Guelph Jazz Festival, which is annual and for me is a brilliant festival that covers some of that ground as well. But I was missing the feeling that I could hop on my bike and go somewhere and have a beer and hear musicians improvise. Or hear a workshop reading of a new string quartet. Or hear a sound instillation of someone's new work. So, I was missing out. Also, Ed Video should be mentioned, because they do a lot of this work as well. But, I felt the need to participate. Unfortunately, this is a community without a lot of economic or financial support. So, I'd often get invited to play a solo set as a part of an Audiopollination series [when living in Toronto], or one of these series of improvised music concerts, which I would love to do, because it was fun, and because I could hop on my bike and be there in 20 minutes or something. If I walked away with \$5, or got paid in beer, or just a thank you, that's fine. But, it becomes a slight different prospect, if you have to hop in a car for an hour and half or more, and pay for gas and parks, and take your life into your own hands on the road. So, I stopped doing these kinds of things and I really missed it.

**PW:** Especially, when Guelph can sustain something like the Guelph Jazz Festival, which has some of most innovative music in North American over a five-day period. If Guelph can sustain that type of music, then why not yearlong?

**BG:** Exactly. I figured there were—or there might be—other people in Guelph who would feel as I did. So, rather than thinking it through, I started putting out these cards and these ideas,

“Hey, there's this concert series starting.” The name Silence was bestowed on us, I guess by Ron Gaskin. I was driving him to Toronto one day, and I was thinking about this, and it was 2012 and John Cage had just had his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and so he said, “Hey, call it Silence.” So, that's Ron Gaskin's genius at work, as usual. And I didn't attach my name to anything, which was quite fun. So, I was getting these calls and emails asking if I had heard about Silence. Do you know what is going on? A bit of a Dadaist prank there. And then I managed to organize our first show at Macdonald Stewart Art Centre. Daniel Fischlin was a huge part of making this happen. He got involved very early in the process, facilitating, and assisting, and making connections, and making things happen in a huge way. Certainly that first show was a big step in that direction. That was a show that you performed at. That was the very first Silence Show. We also had David Lee and Gary Barwin and Ryan Barwin. And then we had a concert by Daniel's youngest daughter and her friends, and my son was part of that as well. So, a bunch of teenagers doing experimental, improvised soundscaping with some spoken word, and a bunch of other musicians came and joined them. It was very exciting to see experienced performers—like you, and David, the Barwins do amazing innovative work—and then to have these teenagers do some amazing work as well.

**PW:** And that's what it's all about, sustaining musical communities. It's a challenge, particularly getting young people interested in improvised music.

**BG:** That's why my mandate was always to include things like workshops, or handmade music. Again, from a purely selfish point of view, that's one of my interests. Something I haven't stopped doing since I was a teenager is building little musical circuits, noisemakers, modifying toys, circuit bending, or building acoustic instruments, percussion instruments, strings, and so forth. So I started teaching workshops, bringing people in to facilitate and do performances. When Scott Thompson and

Susana Hood were in town, Scott suggested morning music, which is something he used to do at Somewhere There in Toronto. I said sure, “let’s start it up.” We chose Monday mornings at 9:30 at Silence and there’s a session of free improv. And we haven’t missed a single one since mid 2012. It’s been over 2 years of every Monday morning, free improv. It’s been as small as me and a few others, it’s just been there, I play for a few hours just to keep the discipline. But lately it’s been growing to absurd portions. It’s now fairly typical to have 10 or 12 people on a Monday morning and playing free music for a couple hours. It’s fantastic.

**PW:** So, from building instruments alone in your parents basement to building community.

**BG:** [Laughs]. Well, that’s just it. I thought I would try this and if anyone was interested I would keep going. If no one cared, and I never got any feedback, then it was a failed experiment.

**PW:** I mean you’re renovating the space now. And there is a record shop there.

**BG:** There’s a whole little community it’s built up around. It’s become a space. It was a building on Essex Street that I’ve been renting for several years—a little nook—there for my own personal studio. The landlord at the time wanted to rent more space and agreed to divide it, and so I started running shows and workshops at that building at 46 Essex. It has since been purchased by some very good friends of the space. They been funding the renovation, and the space is now a little bigger and much better equipped in terms of electricity and wheelchair accessibility and all these things. We’re covered in dust over there, but hopefully we’ll be finished soon.

“I think that the idea of a space was something that was always in mind [...] And it connects to this idea that some of the people at Musagetes have talked to me about, which is this idea of the Third Space in your community. You know the place that isn’t home, that isn’t work, and that Third Space is a very rare and precious thing now. It’s been largely co-opted and commodified by very different interests.”

**PW:** So back in 2012—when I was performing at that time—did you ever think that this Silence series would become what it has turned into?

**BG:** I had hoped. I didn’t really imagine that it would go in that direction. I think that the idea of a space was something that was always in mind. More than a series, per say, but an actual space. And it connects to this idea that some of the people at Musagetes have talked to me about, which is this idea of the Third Space in your community. You know the place that isn’t home, that isn’t work, and that Third Space is a very rare and precious thing now. It’s been largely co-opted and commodified by very different interests. The Third Space is like a branded restaurant, or a corporate chain of pubs, or a family owned café, or a family owned bar.

**PW:** I get it in record shops sometimes, which is why I like record shops because you find out about new music even if it is old music on vinyl.

**BG:** And there’s often community in record shops. You see the regulars there and you know what they’re interested in. That was the kind of space I hoped to create and that’s what’s certainly begun at Silence.

**PW:** There have been a lot of artists who have performed at Silence. Are there any shows, or events, that have taken place or transpired within that space that have made you say, “Oh wow, this is happening.” Or, are those wow moments weekly things for you?

**BG:** It’s pretty constant. We do a lot of shows there. I think since that first show there have been 120-130 Silence (or co-) presentations. We’ve partnered with a few local organizations, like Ed Video, like the Kazoo festival, the Guelph Jazz Festival, the Festival of Moving Media...

**PW:** So, the Silence festival must be next, or is it just always ongoing...

**BG:** It's ongoing. As much as I love festivals I feel overwhelmed. There is too much to take in and you are let down at the end. The Guelph Jazz Festival, the Sound Symposium, Victoriaville: these are places you go and you spend time in a town and you get this sort of utopian feeling that there is this world of people and world of interesting music and culture that you're interested in. So the idea of Silence is not so much to have a festival, but to have something that is continuous and can support the creation of new works, and innovative work throughout the year. I have thought of festival ideas, but they are not the weekend festival idea.

**PW:** Have there been any challenges that have been hard to overcome? Or, has it been fairly seamless.

**BG:** Oh no! Not seamless at all. There have been some serious challenges. For me, most problematic is that sometimes audience turnouts are very low. And I know they are just about anywhere for innovative music making. That's part of the problem and part of the challenge that I face as a programmer and as someone who runs a space is to engage people in this idea of *music*, as you called it. It's a brilliant notion and how to demystify contemporary music and experimental music generally. My belief is that it is for everyone. It should not be an ivory tower, tucked away special thing. It should be everyday.

**PW:** I mean even classical music. The term "classical music" is an invention of the Victorian era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Classical music

was often listened to in the round, and people ate food and conversed, and even Beethoven left space for improvisation. It seems like this is lost on modern audiences who go to a performance to hear a version of what they expect from listening to the recording.

**BG:** I mean, even opera used to be performed in spaces full of people talking, eating, and flirting, and yelling at each other. If they heard an aria they liked they'd yell for an encore....

**PW:** I heard it's still like that in Italy a little, and people eat popcorn and stuff.

**BG:** Somewhat, it's definitely calmed down compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's frustrating for me because at this point Silence doesn't have any significant funding; we've had a little bit of support from a foundation, Musagetes and Cities for People, and some individual donations, which have been fantastic, but by and large it's very much a hand to mouth organization, so the musicians that come rely on audience turnout for their fees. But, more important than that is that I see people coming and just playing their asses off a lot of the time and playing incredibly beautiful music and I feel frustrated that there are not more people

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there to share it. So, that's been a challenge just the financing side, generally. I know every innovative music space and series has those challenges. And I'm sure we'll continue to, but of course we are very new. We've only just been incorporated as a non-profit and so we're just now moving onto the stage where we can apply for funding. So I'm hoping some of those tensions will ease over the next little while.

**PW:** I hope so too. I'll end by asking, where are you going next, musically? We've talked about

the Silence space, and influences in your past, but are there any ongoing projects that you have that you are working on currently... where is your thinking going? I mean that is a large question, and you can answer it however you choose.

**BG:** It is a large question. I have lots of ideas and lots of plans and Silence takes an enormous amount of my time. And so a lot of those plans are not going into effect or moving forward because Silence just demands—the organization of the space and running shows, and promotion, and coordinating musicians, and scrambling for money, all of those things—a lot of time. I believe that

Silence is an important thing and I will keep plugging away at it, so my own work has definitely taken a backseat over the last couple years.

**PW:** I mean, speaking of *musicking*, that is an act of creating music in a way.

**BG:** It is. And so, I think I'm excited about where that is going to go. As much as I am excited by my own work when I have a chance to do it, recent shows with Pierre-Yves Martel for instance, when I've had a chance to do a sound installation, or a performance at the jazz festival, or another festival... I also sort of see the work at Silence as a kind of creation—it's just a bigger, longer-term project. It's social or cultural engineering, trying to build capacity in the community for the creation of new innovative music and sound. The focus at

Silence is all kinds of innovative sound making as you referred to in the little blurb about Silence. It's not sort of limited to anything in particular, except that I want to know that it is pushing boundaries in some way. So if it is improvised, that's great. If it is composed, that's great. If it's for classical new music instrumentation, that's great. If it is for electronics, that's great. If it's sludge metal, that's fantastic. If it's acoustic toys... anything. Anything, as long as there is something challenging aesthetically and intellectually and I guess emotionally. This is the music that I am interested in supporting somehow at Silence.

**PW:** That's great. And there are very few spaces that are that welcoming to different kinds of music. Often we operate under the auspices of a certain genre. Often those genres can be very narrowing and rigid.

**BG:** Well, this goes back to the Marcel Duchamp quote in that I am trying to keep my taste out of it, but keep my interest in it.

**PW:** I think that's a good note to end on.

“The focus at Silence is all kinds of innovative sound making [...] It's not sort of limited to anything in particular, except that I want to know that it is pushing boundaries in some way. So if it is improvised, that's great. If it is composed, that's great. If it's for classical new music instrumentation, that's great. If it is for electronics, that's great. If it's sludge metal, that's fantastic. If it's acoustic toys... anything. Anything, as long as there is something challenging aesthetically and intellectually and I guess emotionally. This is the music that I am interested in supporting somehow at Silence.”