Inside Voices – Time

From 11-20 August 2017, I was an artist at the Kilkenny Arts Festival in Ireland. This involved playing in a series of "normal" concerts, but I was also invited to mount a new version of *Inside Voices*, after its success at the V&A. So although this performance did not technically take place under the auspices of this PhD, it is relevant enough that I would like to bring it in to the discussion here.

The format this time was very much like that at the V&A: it happened over four days, the sessions lasted 3 hours, and each person got a 3-4 minute piece. Listeners could book approximate time slots in advance, but walk-ins were also possible, and it was free of charge. There had been good press coverage in advance, so the reserved time slots were fully booked. The main difference between the Kilkenny and V&A versions of this project was the space in which it happened. At the museum, it was inside Trajan's column: indoors, darkish and very close quarters with an extremely high ceiling open to the skylights. In Kilkenny it was inside Talbot's Tower: a 13th-century round tower about four metres in diameter, with a roughly 3m-tall ceiling of reed and mud, which itself was medieval. So while not technically in a museum, the experience was still framed by a very historical (and preserved) space. The acoustic was warm and not overly resonant but beautiful, helped by the textured ceiling. The light was limited to the daylight coming in through three narrow slit-shaped windows, and a few candles the organisers had provided. There was very minimal background noise from the street, although a few unfortunate individuals had their sessions marred by the interjections of an over-excited terrier in the garden next door.

Coming into this project, I had a bit of an idea about what to expect emotionally, but knew it was also bound to be quite different from what had happened at the V&A two years prior. I felt that the learning experience of *Inside Voices* in 2015 had helped me to show more of my true self as a performer, so I wasn't expecting to be caught off guard by the need to open up. It's still and probably always will be a challenge, but a more familiar one.

On the first day of performances in Kilkenny I was, however, faced with a different challenge: time. Before I even began, it felt like I was on a ride that I couldn't stop or get off. There was a sense of momentum to the experience that was moving faster than I was, but I couldn't put my finger on why. I had even turned up early, though arguably not early enough. There were things that needed to be communicated to the support staff; there were no chairs in the space; the team of volunteers needed to understand how the project worked logistically and needed to be convinced why it was necessary that only one person be allowed in at a time, but there was ample time to accomplish all of these tasks. There was also time for me to sit in the tower by myself and tune or warm up for a few minutes. Yet, I was unable to shake this sense of a momentum controlling me, or even dragging me forward like my foot was caught in the stirrups of some runaway horse. I couldn't find a stillness within myself. It was a strange sensation, on the one hand feeling as if—and literally being told by the event manager—I could take my time getting ready, but also feeling that somehow there was a rush and nothing I could do would stop the momentum driving or dragging things forward.

This is of course one classic element of performance anxiety. It reminded me a bit of the experience of playing on live radio, where the red light comes on and the announcer introduces me, and I have two, maybe four seconds max before I have to start playing the piece, as opposed to a concert situation where one is allowed indeterminate moments to breathe or sip water or wipe one's hands, which seem to last a lifetime by comparison, even if they're just a few seconds longer.

The most irritating aspect of this environmental momentum in Kilkenny was that I felt like I couldn't *start* the time running myself. I couldn't be the one to push "go". Consequently, once the performances started, I felt that I couldn't really shape the phrases I was playing, that I couldn't take the time I needed musically, and that I wasn't able to fully communicate with the listener sitting in front of me. The running momentum created a kind of undercurrent of radio static between us, like when you go round to visit your friend with a one year-old child for coffee: you succeed in having a conversation and covering the topics you set out to cover, but there is an intense background noise in the form of infantile interjections which affect the tone of the communication, its flow. The cute kid doesn't prevent you from saying the things you need to say; they're even so young that you don't need to consider their presence as a listener. So the interaction can still happen, and your primary audience, your friend the new parent, gets what they wanted from you. But when I'm in these situations I feel like I can't really speak completely freely. The child that I haven't learnt to tune out is creating a kind of static that's preventing me from hearing myself and speaking naturally, just like the sense of inexorable momentum was for me on that Saturday in the tower.

Now, to think about this feeling of inexorable momentum in Talbot's Tower, with the aim of understanding its impact on musical time, we have to step back and talk about musical time a bit more generally. Entering a theoretical discussion about the nature of time, historical conceptions of time and metre, and how it all relates to the performance of Baroque music is far beyond the scope of this project,[1] but in order to make sense of the analyses that follow, I want to lay out some of the general principles that inform my subjective understanding of time and music.

Time in music-making is such an emotional subject, and I hesitated to even start writing about it because every musician's understanding of what it means is so personal. I notice that when I hear other players speak about their senses of time or rhythm, I often assume their experience is different from mine, and moreover that

theirs is somehow misguided. When I do find someone with a similar sense of time to me, it feels rare and special. It is probably true that, over the course of my career, on the few occasions that I have decided a professional musical relationship was artistically untenable, it always boiled down to an insurmountable difference in our understanding of time and rhythm.

We musicians are often so deeply wedded to our own senses of time that we can sometimes be reluctant to even try to share this understanding with the other musicians we play with. So often in chamber music situations, I have experienced—as both an audience and an ensemble member—someone forging ahead and following their own sense of time, aware of a misalignment with their colleagues, but persevering out of some righteous sense of correctness, pitying their colleagues who have yet to see the temporal light and just waiting for them to "catch up" (whether catching up would mean moving forward or backward).

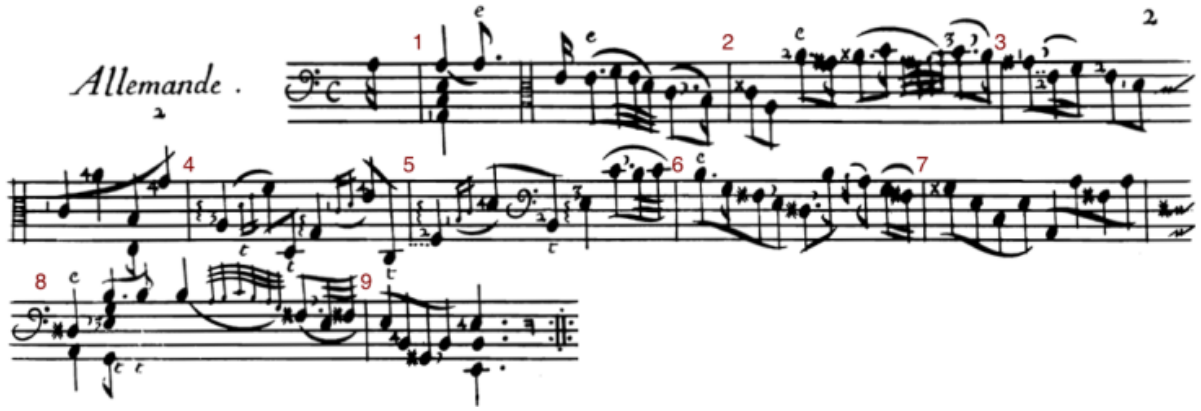
A lot of this has to do with training and the development of one's temporal value system: There are some musicians who undertake playing together through both parties' adherence to an external temporal authority, i.e. we will be together so long as we both play with the metronome/conductor/drummer. It's kind of a "see you at the downbeat" approach to togetherness. There are others who aim for togetherness by prioritising their synchronicity over any sense of external temporal authority, i.e. it doesn't matter how we relate to the beat as long our parts line up. It's like when two schoolchildren hold hands for safety in a crowd; it doesn't preclude them getting lost but it means they will at least do so joined together. There is of course a spectrum, and there are appropriate musical applications for both approaches. The former might seem draconian and selfish, but in regularly metered music it is an effective philosophy for preventing an ensemble from dragging, for example. My personal value system inclines more toward being a lost schoolchild.

I would like now to examine a few parameters in which time can function as an expressive variable. Specifically, I want to look at the rhythm in an Allemande in A minor from Marin Marais's third volume of *Pièces de Viole* (1711). Dance music of course was one of several important genres of instrumental music in the 16th and 17th centuries, and we see a huge amount of early instrumental pieces with dance titles. Sometimes context suggests surviving notated pieces were played to accompany dancers, but already by 1600 we see pieces of virtuosic instrumental art music with dance titles. These titles don't imply the presence of dancers as much as they are a characterisation (like Andante or Vivace in later music) with implications for structure. I sometimes think of these instrumental pieces as choreographies in their own right, especially the richly ornamented ones by Marais. A performance of a Marais Allemande *can* ignore this historical character (as some do), but I choose to include an understanding of Allemande structure among my set parameters for interpreting this piece.

So, in the Allemande we have beats with strong steps on 1 and 3, with some kind of consequent momentum on beats 2 and four, whether a little hop or a swinging of the leg, and the whole piece is characterised by both poise and, in the words of Thoineau Arbeau "a certain gravity".[2] As such, beats 1 and 3 need to have a certain amount of stability, and beats 2 and 4 ought to take us somewhere. Within these structures, the smaller notes can and should have an amount of flexibility; they are connecting and facilitating gestures.

One evening after doing *Inside Voices* in July 2015 at the V&A, I went back to my studio to make a recording of this Marais A minor Allemande for the audio guide to be used in the Europe 1600-1815 galleries. This was a piece I had played several times that afternoon in Trajan's column for different people, and this—single take, unedited—studio recording being made on the very same day, I can relatively safely assume that nothing significant about my interpretation, or my instrument, or the weather, or my body, or anything else had changed, apart from the fact I was now alone in a studio.

So although this studio recording was not intentionally made as part of my research, if we look back at July 2015 now through our autoethnographical lens, the studio recording can provide an interesting comparison with some of the recordings of the same piece from *Inside Voices*. In fact, using this recording in a quasi-empirical analysis is perhaps even *more* scientifically sound by virtue of the fact it was innocently made for a completely different purpose, so my playing is not influenced by any kind of research agenda. In any case, I hope the reader will indulge my referring to it as a "control" for present purposes. Here is the first A section of the Allemande:



Ex 4 Control Recording

It feels quite square and poised and in time, but with a sense of hierarchy of beats, just as one would expect of a good Allemande. In terms of tempo, this performance feels relatively even. Metronomic accuracy has very little place in Baroque music, but for the sake of temporal analysis, here's the same recording with a click added:

Ex 5 Control with Click

It is actually reasonably close. We notice I get ahead of the click in the middle of bar 3, which makes interpretative sense because we're moving through a sequence of harmonies, and it gets right back on track with the arrival of bar 4, which is a more significant and expressive harmonic landing point on F major (only implied here, but

with the addition of the bass line it becomes clear).[3] Then I'm a bit late to the downbeat of bar 6, but make it back in sync by the start of bar 7. This again, we can justify by saying the end of bar 5 smooths out over a pedal point in the absent bass line (E from the middle of bar 5 to the second beat of bar 6), and the trill onto the downbeat of bar 6 is a kind of flourished arrival, which needs a bit of time to settle itself.

What is somewhat remarkable is that both these deviations from the temporal grid in bars 3 and 7 manage to return to a good alignment with the grid once their expressive purpose has been served. This is particularly surprising because I recorded it of course without any click track, and without even any reference to a metronome. The final deviation in this section is the most extreme, and comes from the expressive elongation of the downbeat of bar 8. This is an especially beautiful and interesting harmony, with a trill on it and an *enfler*[4], and it is also a preparation for the big chord on beat two. So the intentional time stretching on this note is a manipulation of time as an expressive variable. Marais asks us to do *something* on this important harmony by writing the *enfler*. Despite the extremity of this stretch, I nearly make it back in line for the downbeat of bar 9, before falling out again under the auspices of a final ritardando.

Let me be clear that, despite the language of the previous paragraph suggesting certain value judgements, I am not associating metronomic rhythmic accuracy with quality. It is merely interesting and a little surprising for me to observe the regularity of this performance. Perhaps there was something going on in my head with the idea that this recording is being preserved for posterity, and therefore needed to be more "proper"? Or it could have had something to do with the writing desk with which I compared the piece. The recording was made for an audio guide as a companion to a highly ornamented writing desk from Paris, 1711. The idea was that both things, the Allemande and the desk made in the same year, had a very square and regular fundamental structure, which was given an extra expressive and perceptive depth by the ornaments placed on top of this structure.

Now let us look at the performances of this same piece from the following two days, during *Inside Voices*. Here is the same excerpt played for a man I don't know and can't remember anything about, whom we shall call Person 1. From the audio on the tape, we had a very limited conversation and he sounds maybe a bit older than me.

Ex 6 Person 1

Apart from the obvious acoustic differences, the background noise, and the inferior quality of the microphone, this sounds really quite similar to the control. Instead of comparing Person 1's version of the piece to a click track, as we did above, I want to compare the two recordings side by side. In undertaking this comparison, we accept that the control performance is more or less neutral, or that it fulfils the reference purpose of a modified grid. In the following, the control is in the right ear and Person 1's version in the left ear. Headphones would obviously be useful at this point.

Ex 7 Control R Person 1 L

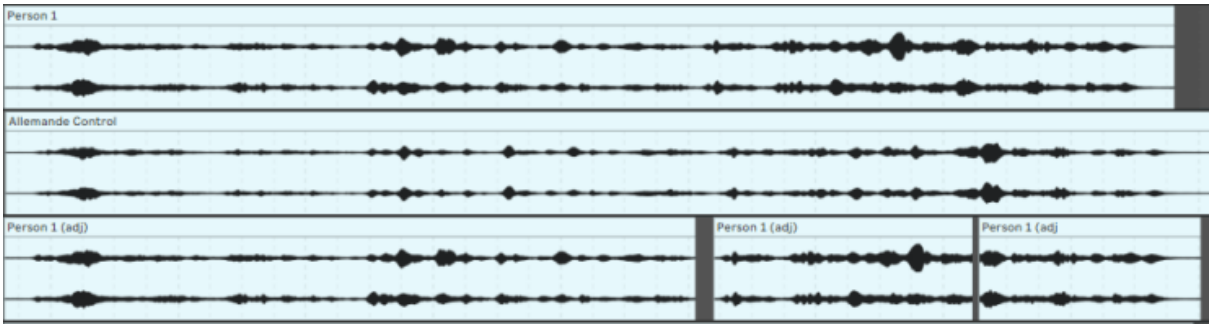
For the first three bars, the two recordings are remarkably well in sync. But from bar 4, Person 1's version gets quite a bit ahead. It seems as if the tempo has changed. Musically, this is explained by the sequence running from bar 4 until the middle of bar 5. As we saw with the much shorter sequence in the control version bar 3, and as in human speech, a natural rhetorical inclination when delivering information in a sequence is to speed up. For example, let's imagine one were giving a classroom of students instructions on how to complete an assignment. The pacing with which one would deliver the phrase "And then perform the same operation for examples three, nine, eleven, and sixteen" is completely different from the phrase "And then perform the same operation for examples five, six, seven, and eight". The speeding up over the course of a perceptible sequence is a casual way of communicating to the person you're talking to that you know you don't *need* to spell everything out for them, but you are grammatically obliged to complete the sentence.

My reading of the difference between these two recordings is that in the control situation, when I was not 'speaking' to anyone in particular, I was not as inclined to speed through the sequence. But in the context of the one-to-one, it perhaps felt more natural to my subconscious to accelerate in this

phrase. It may likely have felt pompous or pedantic to deliver the sequence so by-the-letter to a listener sitting in front of me, despite the tendencies towards regular time structures in an Allemande.

Now, things start to get interesting when we take Person 1's performance and realign it with the control after the sequence is finished. The following recording realigns at two points: after the downbeat of bar 6, and at the second beat of bar 8. As previously pointed out, bar 6 beat 2 is the end of the E pedal after an *enfler,* and bar 8 beat 2 is also the moment after a particularly expressive *enfler*, so both moments are "established" temporal expressive variables. Here is an image of the waveforms to help illustrate exactly what I've done and exactly what you're listening to. The control

is in the middle, the unaltered version of Person 1's performance on the top, and the realigned version on the bottom.



And here is the recording, again with the control in the right ear and Person 1's realigned version in the left:

Ex 8 Control R Person 1 L adjusted

What is particularly striking here is that the more regular or straightahead sections of the piece are not significantly rushed or pushed in Person 1's version (just as the first three bars are in the same tempo). The areas that are musically very regular remain regular, even if Person 1's version is more flexible in general. But the differences between the musical time in these two performances are limited to sections where a bit of time stretching was rhetorically justified, i.e. the temporal expressive variables. This difference comes across particularly in the one-to-one context where a more conversationally inclined performance feels natural. It strongly suggests that the way in which I feel I'm being listened to will affect the way I perform.

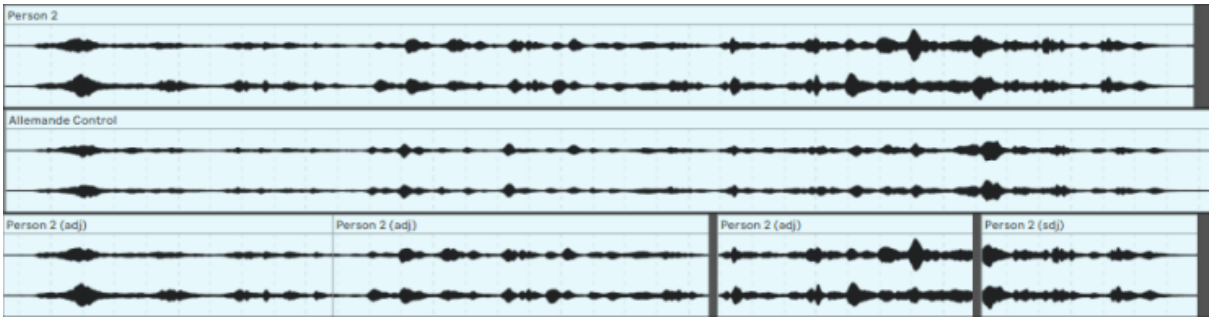
Now, this performance for Person 1 was on a Friday evening. The following day, I played the same piece again for someone we will call Person 2. Here is the version of the Allemande he got:

Ex 9 Person 2

If you're starting to go a bit snow blind, you're not alone. This one feels a little bit more lyrical at times, especially in the high bit at bar 2, and the more foursquare, bouncy gestures are a bit lighter. The interesting contrast comes when we put it side by side with the control. Here's the control in the right ear and Person 2 in the left:

Ex 10 Control R Person 2 L

Here, the opposite happens with Person 2 as with Person 1. Person 2's version starts to fall behind from the end of bar 2. I took more time over the high lyrical ornament and returned late to the foursquare quavers at the second beat of bar 3. It remains a bit behind until, strikingly, coming back into sync precisely at the end of the sequence (the one I rushed for Person 1) in the middle of bar 5. Person 2 got a slightly faster-moving version of bar 7, and as with Person 1 the day before, Person 2 got a shorter version of the *enfler* at the downbeat of bar 8. Amazingly, even though the performances for Person 1 and Person 2 are quite different from each other, and not at all in sync with each other, they can both be brought back in sync with the control by making adjustments *in the same places*. That is to say, both performances manipulate the same expressive variables, but do so in different ways. Here is Person 2 adjusted to align with the control as before, except an additional slight adjustment has been made to sync at the second beat of bar 3:



Ex 11 Control R Person 2 L adjusted

So again we see that the conversational variance in musical time comes at particular moments, the temporal expressive variables. The same basic understanding of tempo is present in all three performances of this Allemande, but the precise way in which the rhythmic strucures of Marais' composition manifest in real time is significantly different between the three.

I have a further hypothesis as to why Person 2's version of the piece behaves the way it does, and this brings us back to something more personal. I cannot at this point remember who he was or what he looked like, but he sounds youthful and his redacted name suggests something that would align him with being "my type". Also—and this was by no means universally true—at one point during *Inside Voices* at the V&A in 2015, I did become conscious of the fact that I had played this particular Marais Allemande for a few guys I found attractive. It sort of makes sense: the piece is kind of butch, technically pretty impressive with all the athletic ornaments, but still elegant and refined, i.e. not unlike how I'd want to present myself to a potential suitor. Furthermore, on the tape (which was running continuously and captured all the conversation I had with audience members as well) I simply *sound* flirtatious, and like I'm trying to be a bit coy. Here, for the sake of comparison, is the opening audio for Person 1 followed by the opening audio for Person 2:

Ex 12 Person 1 intro

Ex 13 Person 2 intro

The difference in atmosphere is pretty massive. You can instantly tell that I feel very differently about these two people and about what I'm about to play for them. Now it makes even more sense to think that I might have rushed through the harmonic sequence from bar 4 for Person 1, and that I would have taken more time over the high, lyrical, sexy trill in bar 2 for Person 2, giving myself plenty of time to land it deftly before moving on to the next phrase. Maybe one could even stretch to suggest

that the lightness in the foursquare quaver sections of Person 2's version is a further attempt by my subconscious to queer the piece under the auspices of flirtation.

I've often made musical analogies with language and phrasing, and it's so striking here to witness the similarities between my spoken rhetoric with these two men and my musical rhetoric. The musical time (and the spoken time) feels directly responsive to a sense of temporal *atmosphere*. It's the bigger beat, the atmospheric momentum of the experience, which is influencing the precise behaviour of the small-scale musical time. Even if the base tempo and the precise duration of the piece in clock time is exactly the same, the temporal atmosphere is so different because I used the temporal expressive variables differently.

My preoccupation with time is not limited to musical time. In a session with my former therapist sometime in summer of 2013, after I'd been seeing him for over a year, he asked me why I thought I was habitually 5 to 10 minutes late for our appointments. It was a valid question; I had never been significantly late, but I also rarely ever arrived bang on time and was *never* early. In that moment when he asked, I didn't need to think long about my answer because I had already articulated it to myself before: I told him that I resented what I considered "the arbitrary authority of measured time". Some part of me was angry at this idea that 1pm was supposed to mean something more than any of the other moments around it. It was a kind of roundabout way of broaching the subject, but to cut a long story short, we started picking through this feeling and eventually ended up at the classic "Catholic fear of judgement" explanation (this was of course *not* the first time my strict religious upbringing had come up). My therapist had focused on my aversion to absolute moments and extrapolated that to the *most* absolute moment of them all, i.e. death.

This is all pretty standard-issue Catholic emotional baggage, but basically, having been introduced to the ideas of sin, judgement, heaven, and hell from as soon as I could talk, death for me necessarily meant a moment of ultimate judgement followed

by the very likely probability of eternal damnation. So my therapist was essentially suggesting that I avoided being there at 1pm because subconsciously I was trying to subvert this absolute moment, which I associated with judgement and its inevitably negative consequences. When he said this, the penny dropped hard. As far as epiphanies go, this is the biggest one I've ever had. As I said out loud to myself that when I die, my consciousness will cease and my body will rot and that is *all* that will happen, I felt so unbelievably relieved. It was the lifting of a gigantic weight from my whole body. It was also a positive shock to realise that, long after renouncing Catholicism, there still existed this latent fear of a fictitious being's judgement that was constantly haunting me.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with religious emotional baggage, this latent anxiety about judgement did not just disappear with a single epiphany; it is still a constant companion in my life. Yet, whenever I think about the fact that I will die, it makes me incredibly happy. It feels like someone splashes cold water on my face and reminds me, not that time is running out, but that I alone am in charge of my time. It brings me into the present and shows me that I have agency in my own life, and that I am not living to satisfy the approval of anyone else, let alone a fictitious being. My death-joy is kind of a direct inversion of the 17th-century Christian *memento mori*, where whenever I see the skulls and cut flowers, I breathe a deep sigh of relief.

So, as we can see from this 2013 therapy epiphany, measured time has some powerful symbolism for me. This plays out in my relationship to musical timing in ways we will continue to explore in the following chapters. Here in the Marais Allemande we've discussed, I was subverting the measure in two different ways: one to make polite conversational sense and one to flirt. In both cases, the tension between accurate representation of the piece's rhythm and my slightly subversive execution of it was the primary expressive variable I used. And in the one-to-one performance, this temporal subversion was both about asserting my own agency in the music making, and inviting the listener to enjoy theirs. Moving forward through the harmonic sequence was saying to Person 1, "You understand where I'm going with this; I know you're listening and recognise your intelligence", whereas my

coquettish indulgence in the high ornaments of bar 2 was asking Person 2 “Is it hot in here or is it just me?”.

There is another, related moment of epiphany that I experienced in spring 2019, which, in a previous draft of this document, I referenced on three separate occasions without realising I had already mentioned it (This kind of forgetful repetition happens a lot in my notes, and when I come back to them later wearing my autoethnographic monocle, it’s a useful form of highlighting key issues). I was being interviewed for a profile piece by a reporter from the *New York Times* who asked me what I loved most about making music. It was such a simple question, but it took me by surprise; I had decided at age 12 to become a musician and since then it had always felt so obviously the most important thing in my life that I never tried to articulate why. At first I was a bit annoyed by the impossibility of answering such a huge question, but I thought about it for a minute or two and then the answer hit me. *I loved playing music because it was an opportunity to bend time*. Of course by this point the time/death/Catholicism issue was in my consciousness so it all made a kind of deep sense. And we could also swap out the word “bend” for “subvert”.

Some of the best moments in my life have been those where some form of temporal magic occurred in a musical performance: not just the standard taking or bending of time, but something really inexplicable but powerful, and sometimes even extremely comical. And with this in mind, it is no wonder that viol consort music has been such an important part of my career. The individual voices in Renaissance polyphony are so thickly intertwined; one’s timing is almost always dependent on the behaviour of others, except for the few rare moments of a beat or two where one player is the only one that moves. These moments were always my favourite expressive variables in consort playing, where there was a little moment where everyone was listening to one voice and that player had the power to stretch or push time for everyone by lengthening or shortening a dotted minim. It was the balance between subversion and destabilisation that I loved; take too much time and it all falls apart, but if one takes no time in those moments, it’s a waste of a good expressive variable.

So now, if we look all the way back to that first day in Kilkenny, when I was struggling with that sense of inexorable momentum, there is a parallel to be drawn between that temporal static, that thing that was preventing me from phrasing how I wanted, and my latent Catholic anxiety about judgement. That this anxiety was stronger in Ireland, the cultural origin of my Catholic baggage, is no coincidence. Being back in Ireland as an adult is always quite emotionally charged for me, and performing there has been a very useful way of working through some of my identity issues, but everything is just a little more emotionally intense there than in other places. So it is understandable, in a way, that my first day of this project at Kilkenny would be difficult: it wasn't a normal concert; it lacked the protection of the limelight that we discussed in the previous chapter. I'd had to do quite a lot of explaining to the assistants outside the tower beforehand and I suppose there was a fear that people didn't understand what I was trying to do. Even though there was no actual time pressure, the anxieties I felt about not being understood—and about being judged—-were manifesting themselves as a latent temporal tension.

The second day in Kilkenny felt completely different. I had already heard positive reactions to the previous day and felt more confident that the performance as a whole worked in this new context. In the tower, I felt I was able to begin from a place of stillness, that I could shape my playing more how I wanted. And most interestingly, on this second day I felt that my playing was much more varied. Because I was less anxious, I was more open to the presence of the listeners, and thus the mutual listening—the aesthetic risk formed through both of our increased agency—was able to happen and *Inside Voices* was again doing what it was supposed to.

References

↑1	For more on this topic see: Kramer, J.D. (1988) *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies*. Houle, G. (2000) *Meter in Music, 1600–1800: Performance, Perception, and Notation*. Grant, R.M. (2014) *Beating Time & Measuring Music in the Early Modern Era*. Macey, S.L. (1991) 'Music', in *Time: A Bibliographic Guide*. Taylor, B. (2016) *The Melody of Time: Music and Temporality in the Romantic Era*. Rowell, L. (1996) 'The Study of Time in Music: A Quarter-Century Perspective', *Indiana Theory Review*, 17(2), pp. 63–92.
↑2	Little, M.E. and Cusick, S. (2001) *Allemande*, *Grove Music Online*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.00613 (Accessed: 10 February 2021).
↑3	There is in fact a bass line written to this piece, but I choose sometimes to play it unaccompanied because the harmony in the solo part is functional enough to make logical sense; in that regard, this particular Allemande unaccompanied is no different than much of the truly unaccompanied French viol music of the era.
↑4	One of the notational devices invented by Marais is this unusual expressive indication *enfler*, marked with an *e*. He writes that it tells the player to express or swell (exprimer ou enfler) with the bow in such a manner as is appropriate to the piece and the purpose of the note. He says it can mean more or less, and its purpose is to give soul to pieces that otherwise might be too uniform. It's a deliciously vague instruction, which unfortunately is often interpreted by modern viol players to always mean a swell of bow speed.