

## *I Still Want Music To Move Me*

# The Musical Universe of Ian Mikyska

**Ian Mikyska, while primarily a composer, is also active in several other fields – visual art, theatre, literature. In this extended profile based on several online and in-person interviews, American writer Celeste Pepitone-Nahas primarily explores the compositional portion of his work, though the text also examines broader issues in philosophy, language, music, and life, as well as some of the more notable influences on Mikyska’s work: his teacher James Weeks, John Cage, and the Wandelweiser collective.**

### **Walking**

Three young men are walking through a wheat field, to a pond. It is 2015. They are somewhere in southwestern Bohemia. One walks in front, holding up a score. Behind him, a musician carries a guitar by the neck, adjusting the angle of the guitar so that it hits the wheat, making a soft hissing sound and occasionally changing chords. The third man

follows behind; he is the “recordist”, but he is also the composer of this work, Ian Mikyska. He carries a recording device.

Ian Mikyska is a serious, focused – and seriously focused – composer. His website catalogues one decade of compositions, averaging about seven major works per year, and he is the co-founder of the improvising ensemble Stratocluster and the Prague Quiet Music Collective. He has written for *Bachtrack.com* and *HIS Voice*, and since 2018 has served as deputy editor-in-chief of *Czech Music Quarterly*. He moves with the presence of one embedded in deep interior worlds, yet his communitarian ethos allows him to teach the artist’s way of life by example. When I met with him on a cold December night in his Malá Strana apartment for an interview, he poured us tea so imperceptibly that often during our conversation I would have just finished my cup only to look down and see it full again.

The composer notes that the early composition described above, accurately titled *through a wheat field; to a pond* (2015) belongs to the genre of animated score-study videos. “The piece approaches playfully the entire genre of the score video on YouTube, which was something that was hugely important for me,” he said. I could almost imagine a younger Ian paging through YouTube, watching the notes flashing across the screen like a scroll being unfurled.

The video-score for *wheat field* opens with extremely specific instructions as to how to play the piece:



PHOTO: KAREL ŠUSTER

*Ian Mikyska performing Michal Wroblewski's "Variably" with the Prague Quiet Music Collective, Stone Bell House, Prague City Gallery*

The temperature should be over 33 Celsius in the shade, the humidity at least 73%, the ozone concentration beneath 240 Dobson units, and the date “somewhere between the end of the roe deer hunting season and the portion of the mating cycle of crickets which connects the mating and triumphal songs”. Reading these instructions as they appeared on my screen, first blurry and then cleared up, as though the video-maker finally granted the viewer the correct prescription, really made me laugh.

Thinking about how hot 33 Celsius is, I wondered if the piece referenced climate collapse, while also sensing that overt politics might be an imprecise framework for analysing his music – at least at the start. While Ian does place the piece within the tradition of 20th century Czech nature poetry, for him it was more about turning expectations upside-down. “One of the things about writing a piece of music is that it can be performed again,” he said, “but the conditions are so specific in this piece that it can’t really be performed more than once. That unrepeatable moment is the focus of the piece, but it exists in a score, a video, and a private performance/recording; not in a concert hall as a repeatable work – it exists for the listener looking at their screen only. Really, it’s an audiovisual piece, and the gallery is YouTube”.

*wheat field* pokes fun at the very idea of replication in the context of music performance, where the temporal world is fleeting and a concert experience touches us precisely because of that

impermanence. Although a few years old, the piece is classic Mikyska for its strangeness and surrealism, for the way the surprise poetic ending (which I won’t reveal here) knocks you from the most routine ways of thinking and brings heat to the thin line between art and life. The composer of ephemerality and the everyday smiled. My teacup was full again. I realised that in taking the piece at face-value, I had almost missed the joke.

### Beginnings

When I asked him how he initially got into music, the composer replied that at age two or three, he was given a “small green plastic guitar”, and that from there, it was mostly intuition. The son of two diplomats, he was exposed to foreign cultures from a young age, briefly living in Cuba as a baby, and then at age four, moving with his parents to Peru. His first languages were Spanish and Czech, though both were quickly overtaken by English, which he acquired at anglophone schools in both Lima and Prague. Even today, though translation from Czech to English is a large part of his professional life, he claims to fight gaps in his linguistic fluidity.

As we spoke, I noted his slight English accent, picked up at his English high school in Prague and solidified when he studied in London, and mentioned that his voice makes it difficult to place his origins. “I think for many people language at an early age is natural and self-explanatory. You have a feeling: ‘this is me, and this is my language that

I speak and I'm comfortable with the persona that I have within that language.' I've kind of lost that with a lot of the languages I speak," he said.

Music offered up a singular language – a reprieve from the varied linguistic landscape of his childhood, and a place where he could be himself. At age twelve, he focused on jazz and guitar, quickly realising the importance of disciplined practice. He knew from a young age that music would be his primary mode of expression, and he earned his bachelor's in composition from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, where he studied with composer James Weeks. Earlier interests in literature and philosophy did not dissipate, and he later studied directing of alternative and puppet theatre at DAMU in Prague, and pursued academic exchanges at the Universität der Künste, Berlin and at CAS, the Center for Audio-Visual Studies at FAMU, which he affectionately described as “a department for a lot of things that don't fit in anywhere else”.

His website is organised to highlight the diversity of his interests and artistic capacities: a sliding bar allows visitors to select for his role in each project (composer, writer, video-maker, etc.), the type of media used (image, text, voice, etc.), and even his degree of involvement. Another page on the website leads to the “Game” – a series of clickable prompts reminiscent of “Choose Your Own Adventure” games from the '90s, which eventually guides users to the piece from his oeuvre that resonates most with them.

“I'd like something that isn't”, the first prompt reads, providing the clickable choices “Too serious”, “Too playful”, “I don't care”, or “Start again”. If you start over, the first prompt will be different the next time round. Do you enjoy the sound of a classically trained singing voice, does it “repulse you physically”, or is it “OK if it's not Wagner”? It's refreshing to find a composer who is not afraid to poke fun at “the greats”. As John Cage once said, “Music does not have to be serious.” Mikyska might amend the statement: Music does not have to be serious all the time.

### Facing the Greats

By his first years at university, Mikyska came to one of his most prolonged obsessions: the frustrating reality that music can express but cannot speak.

His literature studies inspired him to use language in conjunction with music, so that the words might expand the abstractions of sound, giving sound meaning. This ideology resulted in high-theory, intertextual pieces now within his early works, such as *Metamorphoses for Two Clarinets*, based on a Poulenc Sonata and the opening of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, *Hemiplegia for Singer*, *Two Narrators and Ensemble*, based on five stories from *Dubliners* by James Joyce and poems by Seamus Heaney (both from 2012), and his later *Recrudescences*, connected to a 13th-century poem by Petrarch (2016).

While today Mikyska has an entire wall in his home library devoted to John Cage, at university, his relationship with the American composer was both fruitful and “kind of antagonistic”. Cage believed that a composer should not think about “purpose” and instead focus solely on sound. Mikyska felt annoyed. “I was a little infuriated by Cage's refusal to explain things,” he said over an email interview, “I disagreed with his insistence that music doesn't mean anything.” Yet the more he read interpretations of Cage, and especially as he saw him through the eyes of James Weeks, Ian began to understand that “what Cage was staying was prescriptive rather than descriptive,” – that he was “trying to point to what can happen when you take the perspective that things don't (need to) mean anything.”

Mikyska was drawn to the way that both Weeks and Cage, in everyday life and within artistic projects, lived out certain embodied ideals. Both believed in and adhered to a “paradoxical combination of absolute openness and freedom, but also a real focus on honesty and discipline”. Yet at the same time, he was bothered that Cage spoke about Zen for almost forty years without ever doing seated meditation. In reaction – and from genuine curiosity – Ian began to explore Buddhism and Zen by reading texts and attending retreats. Though he has not woken up before dawn to meditate since the last lockdown, his recent works reflect the influence of such practices on his life and work. He has moved further away from analytical, concept-heavy music – though that has remained part of his process – and towards a musicality centred on experience and physicality.

In February 2024, the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra in Ostrava premiered *Drops; mist; rain* on



a standard subscriber programme sitting right next to the Berg violin concerto and Brahms's second symphony. For this work, Mikyska rearranged the orchestra to act as a physical, visual field, dividing string players into individual parts rather than grouping them into traditional orchestral sections. Seen from above, the piece is not about what note is being played, but where the notes are coming from – how the drops fall and ricochet. “I’m making an orchestra do something that they normally don’t do, which is always just a bad idea in principle,” he noted in our interview, prior to the concert. Yet under the direction of French conductor Lucie Leguay, the piece came to life full of colour, and in an Instagram post after one of the rehearsals, Ian wrote: “It’s always magical when sounds go from moving across a few centimetres of paper to moving among real people on a real stage... where the few centimetres suddenly become twelve metres.” In emphasising the spatial element of music, he created a new playing field altogether.

### Water on Stones

Mikyska’s pieces interweave ideas from the nature world, the artistic process, and everyday life, strands which cannot be extricated from the braid. Several works relate to his studies of Zen and calligraphy, such as *Shan shui* (2022), which was inspired by the Chinese word for landscape painting. “I began thinking about the relationship between a brushstroke and a bow stroke”, he said. “The main difference is that the sound doesn’t leave a trace, whereas the brush does. The composition becomes an idealised version of making a calligraphic painting without leaving any traces.” He then suggested the imagery of a person using water to paint on stones. At times the sound of *Shan shui* mimics hairpin turns, building to peaks of intensity and then dissolving again – from a flurry of noise erupting from Slovak overtone flutes submerged into buckets of water, back to a trickle of cold rain.

Whether he is exploring themes of emptiness and boundlessness (*In which things are neither the same nor different*) or impermanence and ending (*All Ending, fading at unequal rates, fading into*), his work marks the visual, almost palpable obsession with duality that has taken root in his musical psyche.

“One image that’s strongest for me is mountains coming out of the mist, but the mist is actually just the paper,” he said, “You’re covering most of what you’re showing. Through that absence comes presence. It makes an impact.” Ian’s exploration of Zen extends to his leadership within a niche sub-genre of contemporary music – that of quiet music, or music based on stillness, silencing, and slowing down.

### Approaching Quietude

The composer was first influenced by the Wandelweiser collective, a loose-knit yet united group of musicians founded in the 1990s who serve as a central constellation in the quiet music universe, when he studied in London. In a 2009 essay, “Wandelweiser,” composer and collective member Michael Pisaro writes that the name of the group can be understood as a combination of *Wandel* with *Wegweiser*, meaning “change signpost” or “change wisely” – but he is quick to note that the name was probably something composer Burkhard Scholthauer gave to the fledgling Edition Wandelweiser in 1992 without a great deal of philosophical weight.

Mikyska reflects on Wandelweiser: “It’s very diverse. What the different composers are doing – the ways that they work and the ways the music ends up coming out. It’s very broad, and I find some of them more inspiring, some less inspiring.” The diversity of approaches within the group can be seen in countless examples of their output, including an early album, *Stones* (Wandelweiser Editions, 1995), in which artists made individual realisations of sound using stones, such as intertwining pebbles along the strings of a violin (Thomas Stiegler) or simply rubbing two stones together for half an hour until their body was covered in fine white dust (Jürg Frey). What unites the pieces on the album is a focused, yet playful interest in listening and appreciating sound in all its (very) slight variations. Here again we find ourselves approaching that strange terrain embodied by Mikyska re: Weeks re: Cage – seriousness combined with levity, a dedicated approach to music and composition coupled with an unselfconscious openness.

Ian recalls the first piece he wrote that would classify as quiet. He was assigned to write a wind



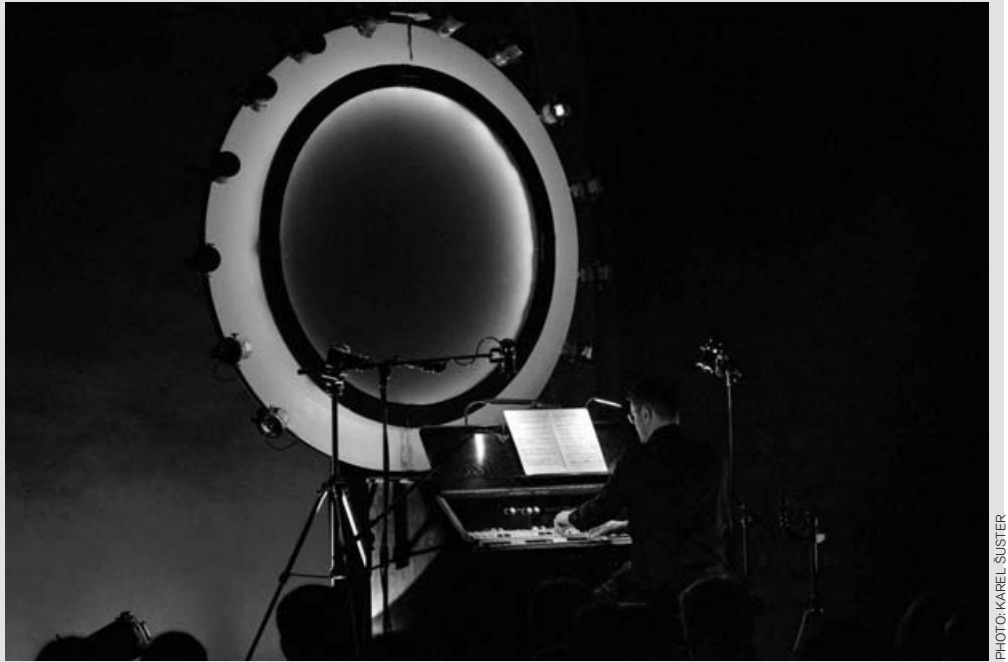


PHOTO: KAREL ŠUSTĚR

*Miroslav Beinhauer performing "In" for sixth-tone harmonium and electronics, Strings of Autumn Festival, Convent of St. Agnes, Prague*

quintet at university and happened to pick up a book from the shelf of a friend he was visiting: *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* by Leonard Koren. It was a random find – something he would not have borrowed from a library or purchased for himself. Yet here, “it all kind of came together – the experiential and meditative aspect, the focus on materiality and detail and imperfection and the ravages of time and so on, all within an aesthetic context that made huge intuitive sense to me”, In a few days, he had written what he considers his first Buddhist piece, or his first piece concerned with the idea of impermanence: *breath; dying* (2016).

Today, Mikyska is the founder and director of the Prague Quiet Music Collective, a group of four musicians that have been performing together for almost three years and who host an annual Quiet Music Festival in Prague. Last year’s festival in September 2023 featured compositions by several quiet music composers, a sold-out meditative tea workshop, an improvised set by Marcel Bárta and Oskar Török, the first appearance in the Czech Republic of Jürg Frey, a true Wandelweiser icon, and a solo piano recital by American pianist Ashlee Mack.

While reviewing PQMC’s 2023 culminating concert in late November 2023, *Fragile Dreaming*, I spoke with two listeners, Michal and Evita, who were lying down on pillows arranged before the stage. Above them hung a construction of white cloth, part of the light and object installation by artist and set designer Tereza Bartůňková, who Mikyska frequently collaborates with. “I want to hear everything,” said Michal, who enjoys drone music and plays the hurdy-gurdy. “I want to hear direct sound from the instruments.” He added that he’d like to recommend this type of music to others: “It’s the opposite of loud music, which you can hear everywhere. It’s a special experience to hear such quiet music from time to time.” At that moment Eva leaned in and exclaimed: “It’s like breathing!”

## Anything Goes?

In January 2024, Mikyska released two albums: *Music for Sixth-tone Harmonium* from Warm Winters, a double CD that pairs Mikyska's composition *In* with Berlin-based Norwegian composer and guitarist Fredrik Rasten's work *Concord*, and *Tracings*, a collaboration between Heerlen, Netherlands-based composer of ephemerality and serendipity, Germaine Sijstermans, and PQMC, out on Sawyer Editions. Pitchfork editor Philip Sherburne responded in late January, writing about the uncanny sounds of the sixth-tone harmonium, an early microtonal portable organ, commissioned by Czech composer Alois Hába in 1927, and recently mastered by Czech pianist Miroslav Beinhauer (who plays on both sides of the Warm Winters album). Sherburne said of *In*: "It's powerfully acoustic and weirdly tactile; at times you can almost feel your ears growing warmer from all the friction. Extended immersion in its waters is at once rapturous and completely disorienting."

*In* was the first piece I ever listened to by Mikyska after I stumbled upon a YouTube video of a live recording made in the Convent of St. Agnes in 2021. I was not sure what to expect at all - I thought that perhaps since the music was "quiet" I would multitask while the 41-minute long video played in the background. This proved impossible. The harmonium coupled with field recordings of insects and birdsong estranged me from the familiar patterns of my day.

The composer is also wary that quiet music, with its prolonged tones, repetitions, and well, *quietness*, might strike some listeners as music where "anything goes." "Anything goes," said Ian, paraphrasing James Weeks, "so you have to think that much harder about what you're going to do and work on it even harder." A piece doesn't have to take four months to compose (though sometimes it does), nor does it have to be filled with earth-shattering innovation (though of course he leaves room for that). The music must ask questions. It must challenge notions previously taken for granted. "The amount of times that I've heard things like: 'it needs a loud part' - sometimes that's true, but this music really asks: 'what if there *doesn't* need to be a loud part? What if we *don't* need contrast?' You know, what if we really do away with a lot of these expectations, and just bring it down to the bare minimum of sound?"

In time, the composer hopes to decouple what he sees as an arbitrary "work versus result" relationship within the world of composition - a mission his Wandelweiser forefathers would approve of. "I think we've been coming to realise that some of this music is extremely technically difficult, even though it looks really simple. These pieces require things like balance, tuning, rhythmical precision. And you need to have those things - not *as* precise as in any new music - but *more* precise." He can spend a long time writing a complicated through-composed piece and then whip out a piece for PQMC with one page of text instructions in only a few afternoons. Listening to the two recordings, he finds that the latter is often a much better piece.

It was a few years after they began working together that Weeks told Mikyska: "I guess I still want music to *move* me." For Ian, the sentence resonated like a clear glass bell.

## Siren Song

A trademark feature of Mikyska's work is the use of field recordings, or sound recordings from the "real world" which he then intersperses with live playing. *Spaces, Drones and Melodies* (2016) contains field recordings made in Armenia, the United Kingdom, Slovakia and the Czech Republic; *Currents/Points* (2016) was developed using a video recording of water droplets; *Nehybnost (Malostranská ticha)* or *Motionless (Malá Strana Silences)*, commissioned by the Berg Orchestra in 2019, uses "field recording silence, digital silence, electromagnetic, concert, conducted, and motionless silences" - an amalgam of various silences that put into question what silence really is.

Mikyska's *Sled několika zvuků a tich (A Succession of Several Sounds and Silences)*, also written in 2019 for the Berg Orchestra, pairs electric guitar, percussion, and clarinets, with the monthly siren tests that ring out across Czechia. In a video recording, musicians sit high above their audience on an elevated structure in a park under Bastion XXXI, part of the remainder of Prague's Baroque fortification. At first one hears birdsong and wind, but soon the piece transitions into a medley of blaring sirens, spoken announcements, and instrumental tones. It's captivating and strange, rupturing the expectations of "everyday life". The piece asks: if we get too

accustomed to our circumstances, what might we miss? Once you experience one of his compositions, it is difficult to walk through your daily routine unchanged. Cage again: “A composer knows his work as a woodsman knows a path he has traced and retraced, while a listener is confronted by the same work as one is in the woods by a plant he has never seen before.”

“Field recorded silence” and “motionless silences” necessitate both movement and stillness, and Mikyska spends a lot of time walking. Walking opens up space to think, to move, and to dream - to explore the visual world. Many of his pieces begin during long walks on Petřín Hill near his flat, and he often uses the sounds of walking directly in his pieces, such as in *wheat field* and *Nehybnost (Malostranská ticha)*. The latter piece contains two field recordings made while walking, both starting on Malostranské náměstí. Again we can imagine the composer-as-recorder carrying a recording device, first walking from the starting point to Kampa Island, and then in the second recording, walking towards the foot of Petřín Hill. Music becomes a map the composer sketches with his footsteps and his breath, drawing as though with ink the passage from city noise to quietude.

### Freedom within Structure

Quiet music does not always mean a quiet mind. Time constraints can disrupt his otherwise centred character, and speaking of a recent composition which was complimented by many as engaging and magical, he relates: “The process was nothing like that. It was really anxious, I didn’t have enough time, I was increasingly nervous and I drank quite a lot of beer to get through it. That final part of the compositional process - there wasn’t much Zen in that.” Mikyska alternates between two modes: working and resting. Rest is crucial, but his devotion to his craft means he has little time for anything else.

To move from a place of busyness and chaos to one of clear-as-glass compositions, the composer imposes obsessive structures on his compositional process. He will compose one or two lines intuitively before going back to rationalise and justify his every move. Although his compositions have transformed over time, his old way of thinking - the hypertextual,

philosophical, intellectual - still has a hold on his process. “Virtually all the pieces that I make have a lot of very obsessive thinking behind them. I make a lot of notes in text, and then a lot of diagrams and little systems.” In *road patterns in decay*, 2016, musicians riding a Student Agency “Fun&Relax” bus going from London to Prague turn the radio up by 0.5 MHz based on a different road rule in each movement, such as tuning the radio “every time you become mobile after being stationary” or “every time you see a lorry/truck”. In *Three Oddly-shaped Pieces of Tinder for Laurence Crane*, 2015, the chords and the preconceived grid they exist in are fixed, yet the duration of passages is flexible. When musicians add wood between movements, one cannot predict exactly what crackling sounds will emerge from the fire.

Thinking about Steve Reich’s essay *Music as a Gradual Process*, Mikyska reflected that although he uses numerous constraints, his overall goal is for his music to be transparent. Legibility is important for the composer - a self-declared populist - whose music is intended to draw people in. I was happy to meet his partner, a social worker who gives support to un-housed people in Prague and whose generous presence immediately set me at ease. Rather to my surprise she said she didn’t know much about music, and yet I felt the two of them shared an understanding on how to live. Their cluttered yet tidy home is full of books and art. A beautiful set of brushes hangs from the wall, which the composer uses to dabble in Japanese calligraphy - something he enjoys from the position of an amateur.

When I finally took the tram home, Prague was shrouded in a wintry mist, and I had a curious book of journal entries by Erik Satie in my pocket - a gift on loan from the composer’s shelf. I walked the last few blocks, my mind circling round the varied, paradoxical, and wide-reaching emotional landscapes that define Mikyska’s work. His voice is peculiar and mystical and explores the place where the artistic project (the written score) and the otherwise “outside” world collide.

Here is the landscape and here is the hand holding the brush // Here is the animated video and here is the guitar brushing the grass // Welcome to Ian’s universe, the miraculous place we are living in.