

An abstract graphic on the left side of the cover, showing a dark, textured shape that resembles the body of a cello. It is overlaid with numerous thin, vertical and diagonal lines in white and purple, creating a digital or data-like effect. The background is black.

black cats & blues

HYPERCONCERTO
FOR CELLO AND
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
by
craig vear

craig hultgren
cello

black cats and blues

1	The Plumber	3:18
2	Pins and Needles	4:53
3	Blues for a Black Cat	6:09
4	Cancer	3:33
5	Dead Fish	6:02
6	Journey to Khronostrov	3:54
7	Blue Fairy Tale	4:20
8	Fog	4:52
9	Good Students	2:58
10	One Way Street	6:21
	Total playing time	46:24

Composed 2014-18

Dedicated to Riech O'Donnell and Anna Lum

Composer **Craig Vear**

Performer **Craig Hultgren**

Black Cats and Blues is an extended composition for improvising cellist and digital technology. It is inspired by Boris Vian's collection of 10 short stories and creates a unique hybrid performance environment for each. All the electronic components that form the "score" are generated live or are controlled by interaction with the cellist. The performer's response is entirely improvised in the moment and is guided by the imaginary worlds from each of Vian's stories.

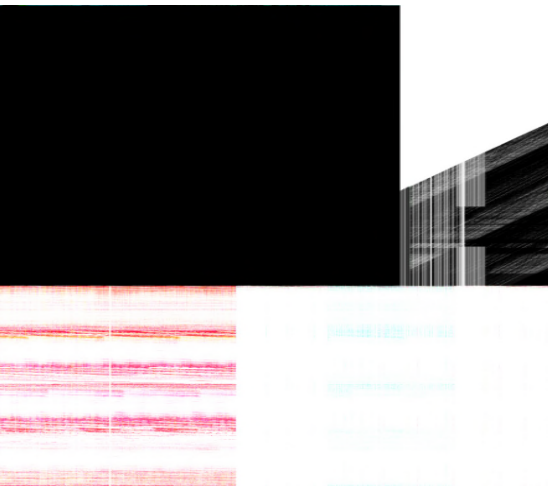
One issue in *Black Cats and Blues* was to reconsider the notion of a *concerto* through a digital score. The interpretation of the term concerto was expanded three-fold: first, the challenge of the musician to use the technological hyper-media elements; second, the manner in which the performer embraces the 'pataphysical nature of the original stories and their translation into sound; and third, the fashion in which the performer embodies the digitally mediated worlds in each of the movements. [Note: 'pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions and of the laws governing exceptions and contradictions.]

The narratives of *Black Cats and Blues* were inspired by Boris Vian's 1949 book *Blues for a Black Cat and other short stories*. The poetic aim of the composition was to rupture the domain of the page and enter the realm created in the imagination when the words are read; using technology and the digital score format. All the reference and found materials that serve to colour each movement are taken from the book and are influenced by the left-bank aesthetics of 1960s France, 'pataphysics and jazz (Vian was important in the French jazz scene of this period).

Sketches of the piece were conceived with cellist Audrey Riley in 2014, and subsequently developed and then premiered by Craig Hultgren at the Kranzberg Arts Centre in St. Louis in May 2018, a performance produced by the Hear'ding Cats Collective. The work was recorded in Leicester, U.K. in August 2018.

composition

The compositional challenge in creating this hyper-media concerto was in finding a resolution between the dramaturgical properties of the media elements in each movement and how they function in live performance. To achieve this, the media and the technologies had to work together: first as a digital score communicating the compositional idea to the musician; second as a creative playground for the musician to explore defined boundaries, materials and co-present *others*, such as generated sound, pre-recorded audio, video projection and sound-processing; third as a poetic retelling of the original Vian stories; and finally, as a digital performance theatre experience for the audience, inviting them to join the flow of live music-making.



the music

1. The Plumber

Dedicated to Marcel Duchamp

"In any case, if I could get my hands on the dirty son of a bitch with his fat kangaroo ass, who botched this goddamn whorehouse of a shit installation."

This movement imagines the actual plumbing problem in the short story. The digital score consists of a short set of instructions and an interactive sound-treatment environment. The environment captures and loops minute fragments of the live cello in unpredictable ways. It is designed to work with the performer in the construction of an imaginary plumbing system created from sounds of metaphorical bends, joints, sockets, noggins, valves, flanges, reducers, splitters, phalanges etc. The resulting music is an aural image of the claustrophobic installation of the plumbing described in the story.

2. Pins and Needles

Dedicated to René Clair

"I have had enough of this war – and I'm getting pins and needles"

Pins and Needles reimagines a WWI soldier as he writes a letter home to his loved one, whilst standing on a landmine which he has just activated with his foot. A pixelated video of the soldier pirouetting on one foot as he tries to write this letter is combined with the sound of distant bombs and mournful tones of a world being ravaged by warfare. Adding to this digital scenography, the cellist reads out random extracts of the letter and articulates his emotional state through his instrument, as if he were that soldier. This inhabitation of the soldier's position is crucial in the interpretation of this movement, where the sounds of bombs become a spatial field immersed within the slow-moving pixelation of the video.

3. Blues for a Black Cat

Dedicated to Gavin Bryars

"They turned to the right and immediately to the left, and something miaowed under the sidewalk, so they stopped to see what it was."

This movement describes two lovers walking around Paris, looking at the sights but seeing only each other. To achieve this, the digital score generates melodic lines that metaphorically (or 'pataphorically) turn left, turn right, then stop, "meow" or move forward. It combines an AI-generated stream of fragmented images taken from a transcription of a Bill Evans piano solo with a triptych of found super-8 images of two lovers visiting the sights of Paris in the 1980s. The movement and procession of this video triptych is controlled by the cellist's bowing motions, and the melodic line is controlled by the rate of change of the AI stream. Further, the invention of a 'pataphysical reverb picks out particular notes or phrases from the live signal and sings with them. At other times, it creates an orchestral drone in polyphony with the live cello.

4. Cancer

Dedicated to Max Ernst

"My head is so full of sounds and odours already"

From the body of the cello come the alien sounds of cancer moving. The cellist activates sounds from across the whole range of the cello's construction. Wood, strings, metal and the contact mics are all conveyors of sonic energy onto this system. The reverb (again a specially designed 'pataphysical effect constructed from found sound) reacts in unpredictable ways depending on the quality of sound energy, sometimes spreading the sound as a cancerous metastasis across the body of the instrument. In the live performance, the video projection of four embryo cells moving slowly and at times violently, provides a visual reference to what is going on inside the body. Overall, the body of the cello and its resonance create the effect of the main character's head being full of noise, sound and odours.

5. Dead Fish

Dedicated to John Milton Cage Jr.

"The rhythm of his sobs ... Sad note on a strident steel wire ... A tender tune that his living thing liked"

The *Dead Fish* sound world is actually a 'living thing' that feeds on sounds; some it likes, others it does not. Similar to *The Plumber*, the digital score for this movement consists of a set of basic instructions and an interactive sound-treatment environment. The musician feeds this environment as if it was the aforementioned 'living thing,' which in turn responds in unpredictable ways depending on what it is being 'fed.' The performer continually assesses the response from the 'living thing' - not to overfeed, nor to starve. The performance is very much in the flavour of Cage's *Freeman Etudes* but with the addition of a responsive and inventive sampler, hacking and glitching the resultant sound.

6. Journey to Khonostrov

Dedicated to Groucho Marx

"The absence of his left buttock seemed to unbalance him."

The journey at the centre of this movement is the most obviously 'pataphysical' of the concerto as it constructs a syzygy of music: a conjunction of things, sometimes unexpected and surprising. Unlike serendipity, this syzygy has a more structural purpose: that of making sonic puns out of words, repetitions, pizzicatos and bowed melodic lines. The digital score augments this by sampling the live sound and presenting it back in random ways. The alternating of music and poetry is wrapped into this playful system with the intended result to both surprise and confuse.

7. Blue Fairy Tale

Dedicated to Niki de Saint Phalle

"Her hair always imprisoned the sun."

This movement describes the central character's obsession with a woman's intoxicating beauty. Melodic lines and sampled counterpoint emerge and evaporate as *rays of sun dancing from her hair*. The digital score utilizes the same image-fragmenting process in the movement *Blues for a Black Cat*. A recombinant processing environment captures the first 30 seconds of the live cello and blends it with the live sound creating an ensemble of low strings. The expressions *joyous*, *illuminating*, and *exquisite* provide characterizations for the cellist's interpretation.

8. Fog

Dedicated to Laurence Sterne

"asinus asinum fricat" (The ass rubs the ass)

The live cellist is a 'pataphysical busker present in a projected video image of a café scene from 1950s Paris. In this abstract world, he is trying to entertain the café clientele with chordal shapes that progressively diverge and only make sense to the cellist. The audience ignores his music and continues to flatter one another about qualities they do not possess. The soundtrack of a busy Parisian road functions as a conductor. Chords shown on the computer screen guide the cellist through the piece, and the signal processing adds sonic ambience. In the end, the busker remains unheard and plays for the traffic.

9. Good Students

Dedicated to James Joyce

“Gaily, they swung their blue caps while whistling a policeman’s march, stressing every third beat with a hearty whack of their billy clubs at a neighbour’s thigh.”

This movement is vitriolic. With strident sounds, the cellist vents about the injustices in the world. The digital score consists of a sound-processing environment that transforms the cello into a sonic weapon with which to avenge the injustices. The performer’s note is *you are the bruise that forms and the persistence of pain in every unjust beating.*

10. One-Way Street

Dedicated to Boris Vian

“On the stretcher Naomi still had beautiful red well-defined lips, dark red hair, and a straight nose. But her eyes were closed.”

Vian’s short story utilises a wonderful variety of colours and mineral elements. This movement is based on melodic shape, texture and the sensorial immersion into a generative colourscape. Central to this digital score is the invention of a ‘pata-melody system that presents fragments of found notation in a sequence from which the cellist chooses notes like following crystal strata in a rock formation. The performer fragments these across different ranges on the cello: low, high, mid, then super-high and combinations of these and others. The live sound is cross-filtered through the recorded sound of ice creaking in a stream. In performance, bright and vivid colours diffuse across a grey space, but they appear only as fleeting moments.

Extracts from *Blues for a Black Cat and other short stories* by Boris Vian are reproduced by kind permission of University of Nebraska Press, Editions Fayard and the family of Boris Vian.

musicians

Craig Vear (1970) is a composer and musician working predominantly in contemporary, experimental, improvised and electro-acoustic music for the concert hall, multi-media installation and stage.

His compositions have been commissioned and performed across all 7 continents (including Antarctica), and is described as 'pioneering', and 'hugely exciting' (John Metcalf MBE, artistic director Vale of Glamorgan Festival), with 'abstract spirituality' (allaboutjazz.com). He is professor of digital performance and music at the Institute of Creative Technologies (De Montfort University, UK).

His works are published by Composers Edition.



Cellist **Craig Hultgren** (1955) remains active in new music, the newly creative arts, and the avant-garde. Leaving Birmingham after more than 30 years as a member of the Alabama Symphony, he now resides outside of Decorah, Iowa as the farmer-cellist. *The New York Classical Review* commented that he, "...played with impressive poise and sensitivity..." for Dorothy Hindman's 2016 chamber music retrospective at Carnegie Hall.

At this point, almost 300 works have been created for him.

He was the cellist for many years with Thámyris, a contemporary chamber music ensemble in Atlanta and is a founding member of Luna Nova, a new music ensemble based in Memphis, Tennessee.

For ten years, he produced the Hultgren Solo Cello Works Biennial, an international competition that highlighted the best new compositions for the instrument.

He taught at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, Wartburg College (Iowa) and Birmingham-Southern College where he directed the BSC New Music Ensemble.



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