

# The Music of George Flynn Through the Lens of Experimentalism

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In this essay I will closely examine the works of composer George Flynn, a Montana native, born in 1937, who later taught at both Columbia University in New York and DePaul University in Chicago. At DePaul, he was the Chair of Musicianship studies and Composition, and by that time he had gained a large following of devotees who were taken in by his work. In some ways, his work often simultaneously presents two contrasting extremes; on one side of the face, a raw, blunt expression of the human condition, often involving violent unrest- and on the other, a mesmeric, spiritual meditation of a more personal nature. In this essay, I will examine both of these contrasting facets of his music, along with a number of other ideas which the music could possibly relate to, to attempt to answer a self-imposed question: can (or should) Flynn's music be described as "experimental"?

It is necessary to analyze the idea of experimental music without bias before attempting to equate it to the music in question. Often used as a descriptor but eluding a simple definition, the idea of what constitutes experimental music is often easy to imagine on a personal level, but difficult to present as having a recognizable or consistent nature. "Experimental" music is arguably both extremely common and a rare niche. If the definition is as broad as "music which uses something unusual or unexpected in some way that is rarely done (or has never before been done)", or as anonymously described on Wikipedia, "any music that pushes existing boundaries and

genre definitions”, then “experimental” music surely exists across all genres, styles, and traditions, even if it is paradoxically more difficult to pinpoint in this way because it is more diffuse. However, if one references the loose genre that is *itself* dubbed “experimental” music, especially that which is associated with contemporary art music via the rise and diaspora of Fluxus and its legacy through the latter half of the 20th century, then experimental music takes on an elusive and esoteric identity that is *still* difficult to define, even if it does shut out great swaths of music from consideration as such.

Looking at Flynn’s music through the lens of the 2nd definition (involving music *widely referred to* as experimental) is a good starting point; the first definition is extremely broad and open-ended, and needs room to breathe. We can begin by looking a little closer at Fluxus, a highly influential and explicitly experimental music group operating most heavily in New York during the time Flynn was there at Columbia University. His own website mentions the group: “[Flynn performed] new music in a variety of New York venues, including the downtown Tone Roads series that promoted the music of Charles Ives, Olivier Messiaen, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Christian Wolff as well as a host of younger composers and the Fluxus movement...”<sup>1</sup>

John Cage, widely cited in particular as an inspirational figurehead for Fluxus, described experimental music as that of which “the outcome is not known”<sup>2</sup>. The actual progenitors of Fluxus took this idea several steps further, intending the “action” involved

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<sup>1</sup> <https://georgeflynncomposer.com/about/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thefader.com/2015/05/08/system-focus-experimental-music>

in their music to necessarily lead down unknown paths, often involving unique performative elements, rather than only leaving its “creation” to chance while the final outcome still has some semblance (or even a fully realized sense) of finality or understanding. Take for instance Fluxus figurehead Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*- both the performer (Ono) and the audience members engage in highly performative actions, in that the audience members were free to cut off pieces of her clothing as they saw fit throughout the duration of the work. Thus, both performer and audience “performed” the roles of complacency and violence respectively, acting out the archetype of oppressor and oppressed.<sup>3</sup> This sense of unpredictable, experimental “action” can be felt in Fluxus progenitor George Macinuas’ 1963 manifesto: “[defining ‘flux’]: act of flowing: a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuous succession of changes. [...] PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY TIDE IN ART, [...] FUSE the cadres of cultural, social, and political revolutionaries into united front and action.”<sup>4</sup>

As an exercise, if one removes Flynn’s music from its possible cultural, social, and political contexts, it isn’t easy to equate it with either the music of Cage nor the myriad of Fluxus works being created all around him in New York (Flynn’s earliest listed compositions on his website are from the early 60’s, the same time that Fluxus really came onto the scene.) There are a few pieces from these years involving electronics and/or tape, but the vast majority of his oeuvre involves traditionally notated music for acoustic instruments, and perhaps in an even greater departure from Fluxus and the “experimental genre”, it is meant to be performed in traditional concert settings; this

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theartstory.org/movement-fluxus-artworks.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/127947>

involves a clear divide between audience and performer, a clear beginning and end of the notated work, an implied responsibility for an audience to remain quiet during a piece's duration and only "freely" respond to it either privately or afterward, and so on. By contrast, many Fluxus works (and works by Cage, Wolff, and other major figures commonly associated with the experimental genre) involve the blurring of these boundaries; they often encourage unorthodox performance spaces, active audience participation, open-ended scores, and an attempted rejection of the undeniably influential power dynamics of the nexus between the traditional roles of composer, performer, and listener.

However, we can shed light on a highly "performative" element in some of Flynn's works, evoking the performative inclinations of Fluxus. This type of performativity is not as tangible as an audience-participation event, nor as literal as an artist's roleplay, but is an implied, symbolic performativity, referring to "action" in a microcosmic language- not too far removed from the performative "language" first elucidated by philosopher John L. Austin (and later adopted and expanded by Judith Butler.) Consider Flynn's monumental 3-part piano work *Trinity*; a 90-minute triptych for solo piano. Each movement is an extended meditation on wartime, although the first two movements in particular function more as a public display, shining light on specific, violently traumatic war scenes, while the third is more of a "true" meditation, a reflection and consideration of the aftermath of the previously displayed violence.

*Kanal*, the first movement, refers to the bombings of Poland during WWII, as citizens haplessly fled into the sewers (or canals) to escape the onslaught. The pianist is tasked

with displaying the blinding and endlessly intensifying spiral of impending destruction, with breathing room becoming scarcer by the minute. All manner of piano techniques are on display here, as though Flynn took every extremity found in previous composer-pianist traditions and set them free to wreak havoc; flurries of arpeggios and runs, great block chords with sharp cutoffs and piercing harmony, and transient moments of respite in which quietly unnerving melodic lines flutter restlessly. What is truly unique about Flynn's language here is the wholly gestural substrate out of which it is constructed, namely the gestural cells identified by Chicago composer and musicologist Frank Abbinanti, a colleague of Flynn's, in his unpublished study of *Trinity*.<sup>5</sup>

The second movement *Wound* acts as an exposé of the Vietnam war, and is viscerally violent, even more so than Flynn's other imposing anti-vietnam war set, *Pieces of Night*. Here the piano is ripped apart, and the extreme physicality of the required playing culminates in great cluster-chords which ring out endlessly. The musical arc of these first two movements involves a unique type of performance from the pianist- due to the extreme physical demands and the subject matter it references, it transcends mere "musical performance" and becomes a type of action, perhaps most similar to a "perlocutionary" speech act as described by John L. Austin, albeit with the performative violence inherent in the piece standing in for direct utterances themselves. The extremities of *Kanal*, and especially *Wound*, exist as actions meant to elicit an unusually strong reaction from an audience. Despite this effect, given the ease with which the piano writing itself can communicate such unnatural and disturbing echoes, it

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<sup>5</sup> Presented in a talk at a Chicago Soundings concert, Queen of Angels Catholic Church, Chicago, 5/7/19.

remains highly likely that Flynn, an accomplished pianist, wrote *Trinity* at the piano, perhaps as an improvisation, as something partly improvised, or even as a completely spontaneous reaction to the violence he himself witnessed, both in media coverage and in front of his own eyes. As a radicalized anti war protestor in the 60s, taking part in the student demonstrations, a colleague of Flynn's was attacked by police and hospitalized- according to Flynn, this was after she had pleaded with them not to strike her, as she posed no physical threat. It is very possible then that in writing *Trinity*, Flynn didn't necessarily have a clear picture of the behemoth it would become- it was created as an emotional and tactile reaction to violence, but grew into something with its own unique personality, as though it passed beyond Flynn's control to become a shadowy, dangerously evocative and highly performative monolith of an artwork which few have had the courage to approach. In this sense, it conforms with Cage's definition of "experimental" music, especially if one assume that the "outcome" Cage refers to is unpredictable for the *composer* as much as the listener. Is it really possible that Flynn had a clear picture in mind for what *Trinity* would truly entail, for either performer or listener, when he set out to create the vast work?

Following *Kanal* and *Wound* is the final movement *Salvage*, presented in several distinct sections, with many titled as *meditations*. This work contains echoes of the violence performed in the first two-thirds, but also moments of something approaching a somber quietude, with slow, intimate chords providing a bleak passage through the aftermath. The title *Salvage* frames an impossible question: it ponderously asks how humanity is meant to heal from the effects of extreme violence, such as the violence

central to the bombing of Warsaw or the massacres in Vietnam, while such obstacles as permanent trauma and the perceived inevitability of cyclical violence stand in the way of such healing. The existence and purpose of *Salvage* at the end of *Trinity* brings to mind Adorno's infamous quote (which is often partially removed from context, but presented as the full sentence here)- "*The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.*"<sup>6</sup> Adorno posits that poetry is meant to capture the nature of the human condition, for better or for worse, but questions the necessity (even the acceptability) of doing so when the human condition has already been so brutally exposed as it was in Auschwitz. *Salvage* may move beyond the usual paradigm of "poetic" art, however, in that it could exist more as a difficult but purposeful question rather than as a representation of an idea designed specifically to evoke response via aesthetics and performativity, a position more easily applied to *Kanal* and *Wound*. Perhaps *Salvage* functions more as a sort of "illocutionary" speech act, one with an *intention* (in this case, to ask these questions regarding violence and healing), where *Kanal* and *Wound* could be perceived as perlocutionary, as they are more focused on the subjective reactions of the listeners. Does this *intention* inherent in *Salvage* imply a diminished connection to Cage's idea of "unpredictability" in experimental music? It might be said that *Salvage* is less overtly performative than the preceding movements, functioning more as a metaphor than directly taken action. However, it is possible that Flynn attempts to

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/people/adorno/AdornoPoetryAuschwitzQuote.htm>

actually answer the impossible question of healing posed by *Salvage* in numerous other later works, many of which carefully focus on very different (often polar-opposite) types of human interaction than the ones which fed the flames of *Trinity*, as well as the related *Pieces of Night*.

The other side of Flynn's music explores intimacy, love, and deeply personal affectations; these are the most vulnerable types of human interaction when the threat of war makes itself known. Some examples of these works include other large-scale piano pieces. One of these is *Derus Simples* (commissioned by philosopher Kenneth Derus for the occasion of composer Kaikhosru Sorabji's centenary, and described by Flynn as a meditation on the "*suggestions of time warping or collapsing in memory, and by the kaleidoscopic rush of remembered images, their transformation and fusion in memory, and their consequent emotional weight: 'objects of poignant and rather terrifying unity'*").<sup>7</sup> Frank Abbinanti describes *Derus Simples* as "*Flynn's music directed from the outside in, his subjectivity always at the heart, the center of the pianistic discourse.*"<sup>8</sup> Coming after this, another work in this introspective vein (also for piano solo) is *Glimpses of our Inner Lives*, an even more understated and intimate reflection of George's own meditations on the philosophy of *Derus Simples*. As explained by Flynn: "*The final portion of "Glimpses" returns to the original material as an extended meditation, now developed and explored, perhaps like a memory completed - a life lived.*"<sup>9</sup> In a similar way to how *Trinity* and other highly active, performative works evoke the speech actions of John L. Austin, the focus on "subjectivity" (as described by

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rodoni.ch/busoni/novitacd/flynn.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Flynn-Derus-Simples-George/dp/B00005AR3V#customerReviews>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rodoni.ch/busoni/novitacd/flynn.html>



Abbinanti) in *Derus Simples* and *Glimpses of our Inner Lives* calls to mind the “trans-subjectivity” of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger. The overcoming of the endless cycle of violence, she argues, can only be facilitated by a concentrated effort to “attune to invisible chords” unifying beings, which might be equated with the “remembered” images we share, indiscriminately warped, transformed and fused throughout time with poignant and unpredictable effect. Ettinger writes: *“The other and the earth need to be known through affective communicating in self-fragilization. The knowledge revealed in this way, of the invisible chords to which our senses are not yet attuned, is at the basis of the ethical obligation to attend to the vulnerability of the other, human, animal, and even our shared earth, through care and compassion and in wonder and reverence. Lets work together against retraumatization and toward an understanding of a human subject which is informed by feminine tran-subjectivity in all genders, and become sensitive to the particular Eros of borderlinking between each I and non-I, which is a kind of love...”*<sup>10</sup>

Flynn’s *Seeking Serenity* for violin and piano duo (written for Winston Choi and MingHuan Xu), as well as his work *Together* (written for his wife Rita Flynn) are pieces saturated in subjectivity. They are love stories, in which two people are simply looking into each other’s eyes and reading each other’s thoughts. It is possible that Ettinger’s idea of trans-subjectivity, which we already know has a great deal to do with a multiplicity of ideas regarding love, argues that the only way to (re)build trust and truth, particularly after repeated instances of violence, is not only to experience one’s own

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<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracha\\_L.\\_Ettinger#cite\\_note-90](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracha_L._Ettinger#cite_note-90)

thoughts subjectively, but also to witness (or “glimpse”!) the thoughts of another, subjectively, through themselves, as is passively but effectively suggested in both *Seeking Serenity* and *Together*.

Considering these two different but inextricably related philosophies present in George’s music, there are arguments to be made that it is indeed “experimental”, although maybe not in a widely understood sense of the descriptor (as widely varied as that may be.) One of the two distinct ideas involves an unpredictable and intuitive action-taking, found in the highly performative and physical works such as *Trinity*, and is possibly illuminated by the various “speech actions” of John L. Austin. The other involves a carefully framed response to such action-taking, even when no response seems possible, by evoking the critical “subjectivity” of thought and understanding found in the writings of Bracha Ettinger. Although most (if not all) of Flynn’s works are somewhat removed from the purely “musical” notions of experimentalism, as a whole, they are hurtling toward an unpredictable future. Perhaps “experimental” is the best term to describe Flynn’s oeuvre when *conceived as a unified whole*, since in the spirit of Cage’s definition, no one can imagine their combined influence in the future; whether they were even partially successful in breaking the cycle of violence through their art may never be truly known. In this sense, everything Flynn has produced (and continues to produce) might be described as *truly* experimental; it is not content to challenge musical conventions in a purely aesthetic way, and instead aims for a broad, hopeful influence in striving to overcome violence through performative action and

trans-subjectivity, the effectiveness of which cannot be predicted.