

## “People Can Be Trusted” - Performative Dialogues in the Music of Sean Griffin

By Karen Yu and Jess Tsang

*Repetition has its benefits*

*It helps lay the groundwork*

*After a while you can start to anticipate what comes next*

*You learn that people can be trusted to do what's expected*

*After a while, you know what's coming*

*After a while, you know what's coming next*

*After a while, you know that people can be trusted*

*To do what's expected*

*To do what's next*

*To be trusted*

*To anticipate*

*What's coming*

*To do what's expected*

*To do what's next*

*It helps lay the groundwork*

*After a while, you know people can be trusted*

*After a while, you learn*

*After a while, you just know*

- excerpt from *Pattycake Part 4: What's Next?* by Sean Griffin

We performed Pattycake for the first time in May. While learning the fourth movement and reading these words over and over again, we realized there was something profound in this music. Trust is a crucial part of performing this piece - in fact, the piece itself is putting the trust established between the performers on display.

### [PATTYCAKE VIDEO](#)

Some of you may have seen other performances of this piece - or perhaps you've played it yourself. In any case, every performance of Pattycake is different, because every set of performers are different. While this may seem obvious, there are very few pieces that require this level of contribution from individual performers, and even fewer that ask performers to examine their relationship to each other. Sean says it best in the following quote:

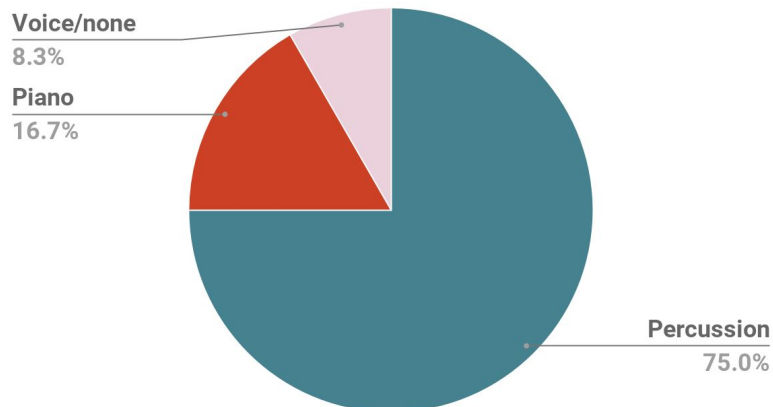
*“I think that almost all of my pieces require some form of collaboration because they **invest in animating specific qualities in individual performers. In the best cases, the pieces are platforms for those contingencies to play out.** Then the true performance-generated manifestation of a piece can be shaped and dealt with collaboratively, enabling a living-art level of composition.”*

- Sean Griffin, “Kung Fu Fan Turns Master: Eagle Claw Wu Tsiao Chen Wins” p.192

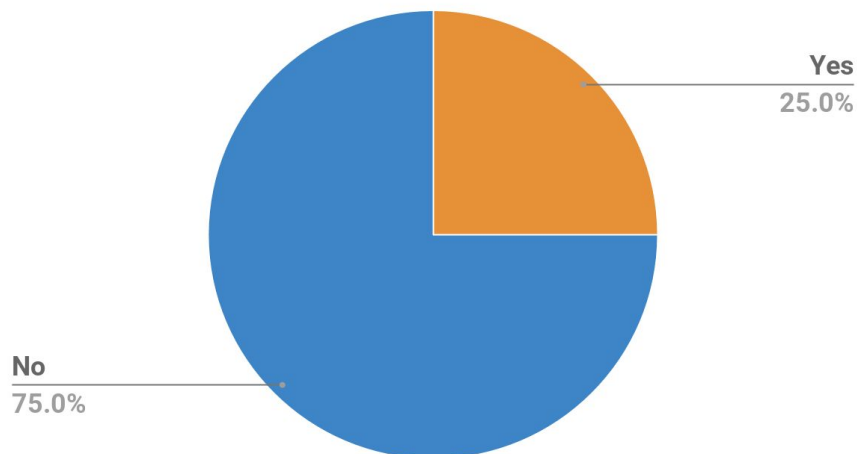
In examining different performances of Pattycake, it became clear to us that there were a multitude of ways for these contingencies to play out.

We wanted to understand more about how performers think about this piece and how they developed their interpretations. Specifically, we were interested in the personal contributions that shape these pieces and the creative impact of valuing connection, dialogue, and ourselves. Here are a couple of graphs that showcase our findings. We surveyed 12 performers who have played Pattycake, including ourselves.

What instrument do you play?



Do you perceive Pattycake as a percussion piece?



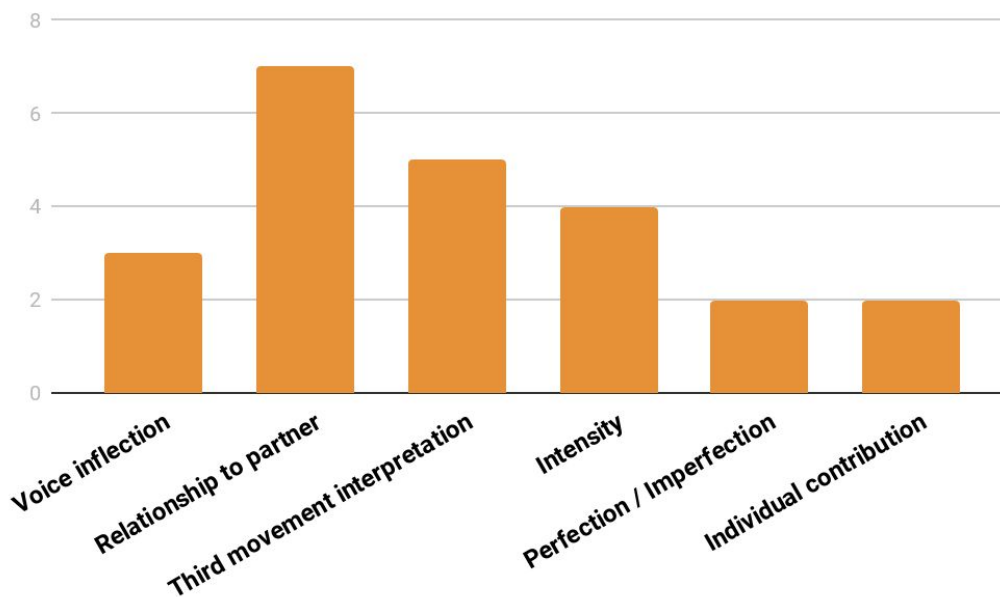
As expected, the majority of our respondents were percussionists, but most agreed that performing Pattycake is not limited to percussionists. As one of our respondents stated,

*“i think Pattycake is a patty cake piece. it requires two virtuosic patty cakkers.”*

We asked each participant the following question:

*In your opinion, what are the most distinct elements in your interpretation of Pattycake?  
Would these elements change with a different partner?*

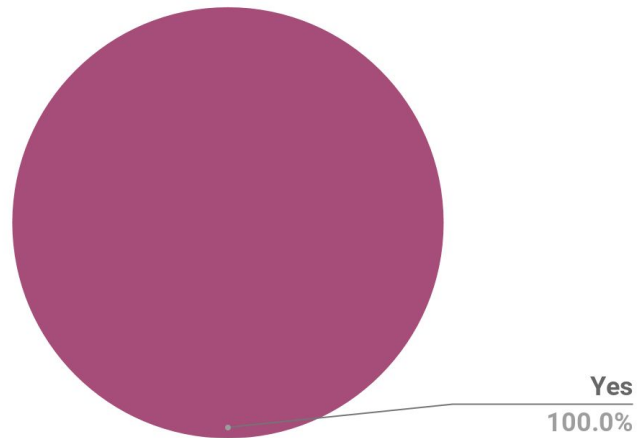
### What are the most distinct elements in your interpretation of Pattycake?



We extracted several common elements from longform answers to this question. Commonalities include voice inflection, intensity, 3rd movement interpretation, and above all, over half of our answers mentioned their relationship to their partner as integral to their performance.

Perhaps the most revealing and, in our opinion, groundbreaking result was this one:

Do you trust your partner?



Here are some extracts from our survey responses. Clearly, this piece draws in performers who already have some sort of relationship. However, performers who did not know each other prior to learning the piece agreed that the piece elevated their personal relationship with their partner. Pattycake only works with people who are willing to know each other.

*"I think our interpretation of mvt 3 was very unique to us as individuals and put our friendship on display."*

*"We chose this interpretation because \_\_\_\_\_ and I have such a long / deep personal history"*

*"You gotta give a little."*

*"It was a lovely way to start to develop a new friendship!"*

*"You learn how sweaty (or not sweaty) their hands get when they are nervous!"*

*"This piece really lives with the relationship I had with \_\_\_\_\_."*

*"rehearsing this work brought out the child within us"*

When we spoke with percussionist Aiyun Huang about these works, we discussed how they explore human nature and draw out one's personality, as both a performer and a person.

She says:

*“When I am rehearsing [Pattycake], I always want the piece to be perfect. [But] when I am playing the piece, it’s all about the playfulness in the performance. [The playfulness] is more...what the piece is about, rather than executing the patterns correctly.”*

All of Sean’s music asks performers to make something - to craft and construct a piece based on one’s own history and body. Arguably, the most interesting parts of these performances are what sets them apart from one another - we begin to see the complexities and depth of individual performers through the structures Sean has created. As mentioned previously, these pieces are platforms for contingencies to play out - and the most successful performers embrace these scenarios with an open mind and genuine vulnerability.

*“There is no opponent because the word “I” does not exist. A good fight should be like a small play, but play seriously. A good martial artist does not become tense, but ready. Not thinking yet not dreaming, ready for whatever may come. When there is an opportunity, he does not hit. It hits all by itself.”*

- Bruce Lee, *Enter the Dragon*

This quote, from one of Bruce Lee’s most famous films, can also be found at the beginning of “Kung Fu Fan Turns Master”, an article co-written by Aiyun and Sean. It is also the description of Aiyun’s performance uploaded on YouTube of *Tension Study II: Eagle Claw Wu Tsiao Chen Wins*. In this piece, the performer is asked to engage in a musical “fight”, with source material extracted from the 1975 Taiwanese/Hong Kong martial arts film “Master of the Flying Guillotine” and the wuxia (fantasy martial arts) novel “Return of the Condor Heroes”.

*Tension Study II* was written for Aiyun Huang and the first version premiered in 2007. We interviewed Aiyun about the history of the piece, which came out of Sean’s idea of sampling kung fu fight scenes and eventually merged with one of Aiyun’s favorite wuxia novels, *Return of the Condor Heroes*. She told us that “The first version he wrote was half an hour long, and actually did not work.”

The focus of the piece is on the sole female fighter in Master of the Flying Guillotine, Wu Tsiao Chen. Female characters are a rarity in kung fu movies, and this piece puts the performer in close parallel to Wu by playing the contact hits and underscoring sounds of her fights. Aiyun told us that Sean drew a parallel between her and Wu, and it was clear that their friendship allowed this piece to reach its full potential.

We asked Aiyun: “How much of a role did your relationship with Sean and your comfort level with each other play in the development of the piece?” She replied, “It played a very important role in being able to make more art.”

To the best of our knowledge, only 4 people have performed *Tension Study II*. Those performers are Aiyun, Jess Tsang, Chia Ying Wu, and Karen Yu. Since the only available “score” is the video

accompanying the performance, the instructions to the piece must be explained orally. It is no coincidence that all of the additional performers were students of Aiyun.

Linked below are two performances of *Tension Study II* by Aiyun and Jess.

PLAY TWO VIDEOS ; [Jess 4:20 - 5:30](#), [Aiyun: 5:00-6:00](#)

What are the commonalities between these performances? We conducted another survey to better understand each performer’s personal contributions.

	Aiyun Huang	Jessica Tsang	Karen Yu	Chia-Ying Wu
Personally connected to Wu Tsiao Chien	X	X	X	
Watched Kung Fu movies/TV shows	X	X	X	X
Narration in Chinese	X		X	X
Martial Arts Experience		X		X
Spoken Mother Tongue	X	X	X	X
Created own narrative	X	X	X	X
Used Chinese Opera Instruments	X	X	X	X

The parameters for performing this piece are both incredibly specific and open to interpretation. There are many decisions the performer must make in order to realize a version that is true to themselves, including instrumentation, approach to narrative, and rhythmic realization. Although *Tension Study* asks its performer to be both the narrator of Wu Tsiao Chen’s story and a stand-in for Wu Tsiao Chen herself, not all participants agree that they have a personal connection to Wu. However, everyone agreed that kung fu movies and wuxia novels are important parts of their culture, and all performers incorporated Chinese opera instruments in their instrumentation.

Two participants have experience in martial arts and agreed that it had an impact on how they performed the fight scenes.

In regards to language, not all participants spoke the text in Taiwanese Mandarin as Aiyun did at the premiere. In fact, three languages have been used to perform this piece: English, Cantonese and Taiwanese Mandarin. Interestingly, all performers spoke the narration in their mother tongues. Each

performer has also modified the narration to suit themselves and tell the story effectively in their respective language(s).

Perhaps the most interesting component of Tension Study is one that we did not need a survey to address: all of the performers are Asian women. While the sounds of Chinese opera instruments and language are recognizable to most Westerners, and it's likely that most percussionists have seen a kung fu movie at least once in their lives, there is a difference between experiencing a culture and living with it. To even begin to approach this piece, the performer must feel connected in some way - through identity, martial arts, wuxia, or all of the above. To fight well, you must understand the parameters of the fight - and be willing to give yourself over to them.

*"Be Water, My Friend.*

*Empty your mind.*

*Be formless, shapeless, like water.*

*You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup.*

*You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle.*

*You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot.*

*Now water can flow or it can crash.*

*Be water, my friend."*

—Bruce Lee (from "The Lost Interview" by Pierre Berton)

Performing Sean Griffin's music asks performers to look within themselves. Rather than the age-old standard of choosing repertoire based on virtuosity or aesthetic, these pieces ask you to create those for yourself, on your own terms. You must be ready to shape yourself into the pieces, to give them something that only you can know or understand. At any moment, there could be the potential to make something great. The key is to understand the flow. We are all a platform for contingencies - as long as we trust ourselves.