Drumming spaces

Approaches to long-aesthetic drumming

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Abstract

This artistic research explores drumming as a practice in which cyclical motion, subtle variation, and gradual transformation converge into an ongoing rhythmic flow, inviting musical experience to shift from progression toward immersion within what is ongoing. The study asks how a drummer can create and cultivate such long-aesthetic rhythmic continuity within open-ended improvisational contexts, both practically and conceptually.

The research draws on Finnish folk music's pitkä estetiikka (long aesthetic), minimalist music, flow theory, and improvisation literature, and adopts an artistic research methodology in which drumming practice constitutes the primary site of inquiry. Insights are synthesised from personal practice, group rehearsals, performances, and audiovisual documentation produced between 2024 and 2025 in duo and trio improvisational settings, analysed through reflective practice and retrospective video analysis.

The findings identify strategies for sustaining rhythmic continuity grounded in bodily and technical ease, held in balance with the uncertainties of improvisation. Central elements include deeply embodied ostinati, dynamic and timbral sensitivity, mindful approaches to change, and a principle of sustainability in musical ideas. In group improvisation, a slower pace of interaction, a non-reactive performance stance, and an open, undemanding listening orientation supported ongoing engagement and a spatial quality of the music. The research suggests that sustained, uneventful musicking may foster flow-like states and contribute to a broader slowing down of attention and pace, highlighting the potential of slow, continuous improvisation as a meaningful artistic and pedagogical practice.

Keywords

Artistic research, drumming, percussion, drum set, improvisation, improvised music, rhythm, rhythmic flow, long aesthetic, pitkä estetiikka, music as space, presence, flow, minimalism

AI Usage declaration

AI-based tools (ChatGPT) were used during the writing process to support language editing, clarification of ideas, reference formatting, and proofreading. All conceptual content, analysis, and artistic material are the author's own.

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Contents

1 Introduction

How might one drum an ongoing space? This study examines how drumming might support a sustained, present-oriented musical condition through an ongoing rhythmic flow that unfolds without interruption, inviting musical experience to shift from progression-oriented listening toward immersion within what is ongoing. It considers how such continuity can be created and cultivated over extended durations in open-ended improvisational contexts, and how the drum set can participate in a spatial, open sound field without becoming an overly directive foreground. What kinds of technique, material, dynamics, and decision-making allow a rhythmic cycle to feel stable and satisfying over time without becoming tense, effortful, or overtly "eventful"?

Conceptually, this orientation resonates with accounts in which music is understood less as bounded work and more as an ongoing state. Describing the essence of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic), a concept within Finnish folk-music discourse, Heikki Laitinen (2000) characterises music as "a space that one enters and exits." In practice, the concept entails extended duration, a principle of continuous variation, and an ideal of musical minimalism (Haapoja, 2017). Related perspectives appear in minimalist music, where repetition, gradual change, and reduced event density shift musical experience away from teleological (goal-oriented) progression toward listening modes in which the relative importance of past and future musical events is reduced, variously described as *ongoing actualisation* and "ambient, globalized" listening (Mertens, 1983; Potter, Gann, & Ap Siôn, 2013, pp. 8-9).

Psychological accounts of the state of flow describe absorbed engagement marked by ease, heightened focus, and altered time perception, offering a useful lens for understanding sustained rhythmic continuity in practice (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Biasutti & Habe, 2023) and aligning with performance accounts within minimalist music (Hartenberger, 2013; Harle, 2013). Finally, improvisation literature highlights how musical form can emerge through embodied action and interaction rather than predesign (Rose, 2017), further informing the practice-based orientation of this study.

Drawing on these perspectives, the research addresses a practical drummer's question: how can long-aesthetic rhythmic continuity be cultivated on the drum set within an open improvisational environment? The study approaches this question through an artistic research

methodology grounded in personal and group practice, performance contexts, and reflective analysis of recorded material. Its aim is to articulate practical and conceptual strategies that support rhythmic continuity in the specific musical contexts explored.

1.1 Research context

This research grew out of a personal search for ease and peace in drumming. In my artistic practice, I have been increasingly drawn toward ways of playing that feel physically effortless and mentally settling. When a rhythm can be repeated long enough for the body and mind to relax into it, attention begins to shift from doing to listening, and to simply *being* in rhythm. Cyclical patterns that I could embody fully evoked a grounding sense of presence that gradually became central to my musical motivation.

At the same time, wonderful encounters with musicians in the Global Music Programme at Sibelius Academy introduced me to a wide range of rhythms, particularly from parts of South America, the Middle East, and Africa. Spending time with these rhythms, learning their structures, finding ostinatos within and learning to improvise around them through focused personal practice gradually pushed me toward a musical logic where drums, instead of serving the progression of a piece of music, sustain an ongoing musical space. A repeated rhythmic cycle could, over time, generate a sense of continuity, a space perhaps, that strengthens cycle by cycle and invites the player-listener into a more present, less anticipatory mode of listening.

My background as a drummer, ranging from roots in Nordic metal to small and large jazz ensembles with many experiences in between, has been shaped and guided by tasks such as articulating musical form and harmonic movement, contributing to ensemble figures, shaping energy levels, a sense of direction and interactive improvisation, all within various stylistic frameworks. As I've rarely come across through-composed drum parts, one could add an improvisatory and creative fundamental to the list. At the heart of all these lies the task of keeping time, playing rhythm in a way that *feels good*.

In this research I've stepped outside many of these familiar shapes and sizes to explore music as a spatial, continuous and unpredetermined phenomena. While keeping to the fundamental of a rhythmic flow, I found myself asking many practical questions: what to play, how, and when? What remains, or becomes important? Answers to these questions are sought primarily

in the context of an intuition that combining a continuous rhythmic flow with spatial, open forms of improvisation is a compelling musical ground to explore. Improvising musicians Juho Tuomainen and Teea Aarnio shaped the orientation of this research project profoundly by providing a musical context in which to explore my ideas, as well as continued inspiration with their presence and musical input throughout the process.

The research unfolds thus largely in the context of group activity, making collective musicking deeply entangled with my drumming practice. As Rose (2017) observes in the context of free improvisation, self-taught, autodidactic approaches often involve a close interrelation between individual work and group processes, with each informing the other (pp. 145–146). In this research, personal practice and collaborative improvisation form a mutually shaping process through which an understanding of the questions outlined below has emerged.

1.2 Research aim and questions

During this research project I have sought to shape my drumming in a way that supports a sense of a space, a sustained presence arising from an ongoing rhythmic flow over an extended period of time. The purpose of this research was to find and explore practical and conceptual approaches to playing the drum set in a manner that supports the continuity of such a rhythmic flow within an open, improvised musical space.

The research is guided by two core questions:

- How can a long-aesthetic rhythmic continuity be practically achieved on the drum set?
- How should one conduct oneself as a drummer to sustain this continuity in an open-ended improvisational context?

These questions are approached through an examination of musical, technical, bodily, timbral, and mental aspects that support continuity. Central considerations include what makes musical materials feel good and sustainable over time, how change can occur without disrupting continuity, and what kinds of mental stance and conceptual thinking support improvisation in the described context.

1.3 Structure of the written work

This written work begins with an introduction to the research context, aim, and research questions. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature, focusing on the concepts of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic), flow, improvisation, and minimalism. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework informing the research. Chapter 4 describes the research design and implementation of the project, including methodology, data generation and analysis, researcher position, and ethical considerations. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 5 and discussed in relation to the literature and research questions in Chapter 6. The work concludes with final reflections, followed by references and appendices in Chapter 7.

2 Literature review

This literature review maps conceptual and practical perspectives relevant to the present research across four main themes. It first explores *pitkä estetiikka,* (long aesthetic) a Finnish folk music concept that offers perspectives into music-as-space, continuous variation, and an inward, non-presentational mode of musicking. It then reviews flow research as a lens for understanding sustained attentional immersion in music-making and listening, including musical conditions that support or inhibit immersive engagement. The review proceeds to improvisation literature, exploring improvisation both in structured and non-structured contexts. Finally, the review addresses minimalism in music as an aesthetic and process-oriented practice, attending to repetition, gradual change, perceptual experience, and performance perspectives. Together, these strands provide a theoretical foundation for the research questions addressed in this study.

2.1 On pitkä estetiikka

This section explores the concept of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic), as articulated in Finnish ethnomusicological and folk-music discourse. The literature addressing this concept offers perspectives relevant to the present research, particularly the notion of music as a space, a non-performative mode of musicking, and a slowing down in relation to modern ways of life. The term is also defined through three features: extended duration, an ideal of musical minimalism, and the principle of continuous musical variation (Haapoja, 2017, p. 171).

Pitkä estetiikka according to Ilmonen (2014, p. 20), refers to a mode of musicking characterised by endlessly varying, sparsely pitched, and extended forms of singing and playing that exist outside the modern notion of a piece of music. Ilmonen situates this practice within the *muinaissuomalainen* (“ancient Finnish”) tradition, the oldest known layer of Finnish musical practice, more commonly referred to as *archaic music*. In current folk-music discourse, archaic is used to distinguish an older, pre-tonal layer from more tonal musical layers emerging from the seventeenth century onward (Haapoja 2017, p. 36; Ilmonen 2014, p. 21). Ilmonen further describes archaic music by its monophonic texture and an inward, non-presentational mode of performance. Rather than relying on harmonic development or fixed formal structures, musical emphasis falls on timbre, micro-level sonic changes, phrasing, and gradual shifts in weight and tension (Ilmonen 2014, p. 21). As Joutsenlahti (2018) describes, “the archaic approach” allows musical motives and formulas to

"float" and transform without the artificially defined beginnings, endings, or formal constraints of the concept of the *piece*, as understood in art-music (p. 156).

Both Laitinen (1990) and Ilmonen (2014) describe a practice of playing for oneself, in which the musician turns inward and the music is directed primarily toward the performer rather than an audience. Ilmonen considers this inward orientation especially important in musical practices grounded in pitkä estetiikka, since the resulting music differs fundamentally from music shaped with listeners in mind (p. 20). In Laitinen's (1990) account, the musician plays solely for their own sake, and as the music unfolds their indifference to the outside world deepens. This is reflected in performances as a curiously internalised tone, as if the whole person were engaged (pp. 250-251). Ilmonen (2014) likens this mode of musicking to a state described by A. O. Väisänen in 1943 as *hiljainen haltioituminen* ("quiet enchantment"), drawing on his observations of Karelian kantele players (p. 20). Väisänen (1943) writes that many may recognise this state from personal experience (p. 43). Ilmonen (2014) discusses *presence*, hiljainen haltioituminen, and *flow* in close relation, describing a state in which the musician is *inside the music*, focused and attuned, as time and the surrounding world recede.

Haapoja (2017) notes that pitkä estetiikka has become widely embedded in contemporary understandings of *runolaulu* and, as a concept, is largely attributable to emeritus professor Heikki Laitinen (p. 171). Haapoja (2017) describes runolaulu performances as potentially lasting from ten minutes to an hour, with musical change unfolding slowly through subtle, gradual shifts. In practice, pitkä estetiikka is verbalized through three features: extended duration, an ideal of musical minimalism, and the principle of continuous musical variation (Haapoja 2017, p. 171).

In the article *Hiljaisuuden ääniä (Sounds of quietness)*, Heikki Laitinen (1990) presents a poetic image of a past to, by his account, reflect on modern conditions. He describes a form of quietness whose opposite is not sound but *noise*. This noise has become essential to modern life, a pervasive condition to which humans have adapted but one that leaves marks on all levels of existence, particularly the unconscious. Against this background, Laitinen describes an earlier sound environment, a historical period of quietness in which hearing was more sensitive and sparse sounds carried richer meaning. Music was created locally and repeatedly by people themselves. The human experience of time was shaped by the rhythms of day and season rather than by the measured divisions of clocks. In this worldview, a

moment and eternity were not opposites but “two aspects of the same musical tone”. Laitinen argues that although modern life stands in stark contrast to this past, these human qualities do not vanish quickly; a longing for quietness does not disappear within a few generations (Laitinen 1990, pp. 247-256).

Laitinen (1990) offers an idealised image of a *runolaulaja* or kantele player performing. Melodic fragments flow along pathways shaped by a memory-based tradition, time seems to dissolve, and a sense of endlessness emerges through the indeterminate and inexhaustible variation of details. Sparse pitch material creates an impression of uninterrupted and conflict-free continuity. Music, in this conception, exists outside the idea of a piece; it is not a composition with a beginning and end but a state of being (Laitinen 1990, pp. 247-256).

In the documentary *Matka muinaisiin ääniin* (Metsola, 2000), Laitinen (2000) describes the essence of pitkä estetiikka: “music is, in a way, a space that one enters and exits, but the music itself never begins or ends; it simply is.”[1] He connects this quality with a wide range of global musical traditions, contrasting it with musical structures that developed in Europe and North America after the eighteenth century.

2.2 On flow

Following Ilmonen’s (2014) account of presence, *hiljainen haltioituminen* and flow as components of immersive musical experience, this section examines the concept of flow as developed in psychological and music research. It outlines the phenomenon at a general level and considers its relevance to music-making and listening, including practical musical and performative details that support or disrupt immersive engagement. In this study, flow provides a useful lens for understanding how sustained rhythmic continuity and long-form musical engagement are produced and perceived.

Among several works (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), flow is described as a state of total involvement where action unfolds effortlessly with little conscious intervention, supported by clear goals, immediate feedback, and an optimal balance between challenge and skill. Attention becomes fully centered on the task, action and

[1] Author’s translation from original Finnish. “Se musiikki on tavallaan tila, johon mennään sisään, ja sieltä tullaan ulos, mutta se itse musiikki ei ala eikä lopu koskaan – se vain on” (Laitinen, 2000).

awareness merge, and one feels a strong sense of control alongside a diminished self-consciousness, described even as “transcendence of individuality” or “fusion with the world” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 141, Maslow 1971). Flow is often accompanied by altered time perception and is intrinsically rewarding. Csikszentmihalyi (2004) presents the sense of being outside everyday reality in flow as a form of ecstasy, arguing that this intensity arises from the finite nature of human attentional capacity: when attention is fully absorbed by an engaging activity, none remains to monitor the body or the self. As he puts it, in flow, existence is suspended.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p.21) connects the concept of flow with several contemplative traditions, including the yogic disciplines of India, Taoist practices in China, and Zen forms of Buddhism. Discussing the bodily dimension of flow, he notes parallels with Hatha Yoga, suggesting that its eight-stage discipline similarly aims at a joyous, self-forgetful mode of involvement grounded in concentrated attention and disciplined bodily practice (1990, pp. 104-105). In *Effortless Attention* (Bruya, 2010), Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2010, p. 188) distinguish between direct methods of training, such as Zen Buddhist practices and mindfulness, and an indirect path in which effortless attention arises through deep engagement in a meaningful activity. They suggest that this indirect mode of involvement, (flow, essentially) offers many of the same psychological benefits that are associated with meditation (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2010, p. 188).

Biasutti and Habe (2023) provide an overview of flow research across music performance, practice, improvisation, and listening. Flow is described as an ecstatic, trance-like state in which music emerges spontaneously and body and mind feel harmonised, enabling heightened expressiveness, imagination, and a sense of ease that allows musicians to experiment freely with new musical ideas. They also note that live performance settings can create ideal conditions for flow, but varying performance contexts make its occurrence unpredictable. Flow is closely tied to high-quality music practice, which requires sustained, uninterrupted work, effective self-regulated learning strategies, and deep cognitive, motor, and expressive engagement (Biasutti and Habe, 2023).

In line with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990, p. 109) view that attentive listening is essential for musical enjoyment, Loepthien and Leipold (2022) find that higher engagement in music listening predicts more intense flow. Their findings also indicate that music listening can be

more conducive to flow experiences than performing music, which they suggest is due to the more intimate character of listening and the absence of the socio-evaluative pressures associated with public performance. A high level of previous musical training was found to moderate these negative effects (Loepthien and Leipold, 2022). Aligning with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, p. 99) notion that dancing is a prototypical flow activity, Biasutti and Habe (2023, p. 181) highlight groovy, movement-inducing music as conducive to flow, noting that a certain degree of syncopation helps maintain a level of interest during listening.

Zielke, Anglada-Tort, and Berger (2023) examine specific features that shape flow in music performance. They propose that flow emerges when musical expectations are fulfilled and is disrupted when they are violated. Across their two studies, flow-inducing musical features include melodic stepwise motion, repeated sequences, swelling dynamics, and agogics, or rubato, understood as using time and stress to emphasize notes. Performance factors include memorisation, improvisation, low anxiety, the absence of mistakes, and strong emotional engagement. These findings align with Biasutti and Habe's (2023) broader review, which highlights preparation, confidence in one's abilities, and a strong bodily connection as conducive to flow. Improvisation is highlighted (Biasutti and Habe, 2023) as an important condition for entering flow, and flow in turn as a crucial component of successful improvisation, since it enhances fluency and spontaneity in the creative process.

As disruptive to flow, Zielke et al. (2023) identify sudden melodic, harmonic, or dynamic changes, disjunct motion, syncopation, and intonation irregularities. Performance-related disruptions were technical anxiety, mistakes, and loss of synchrony with the group. Biasutti and Habe (2023) similarly identify internal factors such as anxiety, nervousness, impatience, and general distraction as inhibiting flow. External conditions, such as the sonic environment, audience feedback, and social settings, can both interfere with or support flow. They note that flow-inhibiting conditions are often perceived as uncontrollable, whereas factors that support flow are seen as at least partly within the performer's control.

2.3 On improvisation

The following examination of improvisation in literature finds concerns central to the present research, including improvisation as a practice in an open environment, as an embodied process alongside questions of structure, spontaneity, learning, audience presence, and authorship.

Simon Rose, in *The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life* (2017), views improvisation as a fundamental human capacity: responding to emerging situations across everyday life, the arts, and other disciplines; being in the world is creative improvisation (pp. 9, 162). As a mode of musical engagement, Rose understands improvisation as a self-generating activity in which the process itself is both the means and the end, an "open activity that is endlessly available and flexible" (pp. 117, 144). Rose writes with a particular focus on free improvisation as a "relatively open form of not-predetermined musical performance" (p. 21) and bases his account on interviews with ten practitioners from Europe and North America (p. 10).

"Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood" (Bailey, 1993, p. ix).
In *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Bailey (1993) likewise presents improvisation as a fundamental practice, one shaped by context, tradition, and the values of the musicians involved, and as a creative force behind much of the world's musical development. He examines improvisation across a range of traditions, drawing on conversations with practicing musicians within North Indian classical music, flamenco, baroque and organ music, rock, and jazz. By his account, improvisation remains elusive and resistant to fixed theory and documentation due to its ever-changing and adaptive nature; it is "essentially non-academic" (Bailey, 1993, p. ix).

Bailey (1993) distinguishes between two main forms of improvisation. *Idiomatic improvisation* is oriented toward expressing a specific musical style or tradition and derives its identity and purpose from that idiom. *Non-idiomatic improvisation* focuses on concerns other than the expression of a particular style and is most often associated with free improvisation (p. xi).

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological call to "return to the things themselves," to the world that precedes abstract knowledge, and Pauline Oliveros's notion that "the body knows," Rose (2017, pp. 131-132) frames improvisation as fundamentally embodied, involving the interplay of perceptual, motor, and conceptual activity alongside pre-conscious, unconscious, and conscious processes (pp. 130, 143). Rose notes experienced improvisers intuitively know not to overanalyse the activity: "the not-predetermined form emerges by

allowing the body to lead" (p. 142). He writes explicitly against preparing for an improvisation by verbal discussion, emphasizing that "embodied sound first and spoken word second" is central to improvisation practice (Rose, 2017, p. 142).

Rose (2017) likens improvisation to self-organizing processes in the natural world: a creative and social process that unfolds in an indeterminate manner in real time through feedback and interaction between players, the group, and their environment, without an external design or designer. Trust and risk are elemental as improvisers must accept vulnerability and uncertainty to allow discovery in the moment. Since it is the creative activity itself—the process over its product—that constitutes the artwork, improvisation challenges the notion of the musical work (Rose, 2017, pp. 91–101).

Rose (2017) notes that free improvisers typically develop through autodidactic, self-directed practice, motivated by life-long personal exploration. Individual and group practice inform one another, as ensemble playing reveals what needs development and personal practice feeds back into the shared music. Rose notes that improvising musicians typically devote extensive time to practice in order to develop and sustain technical facility, with technique valued not for its own sake but as a means of supporting the creative and collaborative demands of improvisation (Rose, 2017, pp. 146-147). In discussion with Roscoe Mitchell, Rose highlights the close link between spontaneity and compositional knowledge that is central to Mitchell's approach to spontaneous composition. Mitchell cautions against a "following" approach to improvisation, particularly in large ensembles, where it can limit musical development. Rose encourages cultivating an analytical sensitivity as part of developing musical awareness for improvising and emphasises the value of working in more transparent solo and small-group contexts, where the effects of decision-making can be clearly perceived (Rose, 2017, p. 151).

Rose (2017) challenges the common emphasis on *spontaneity* in improvisation, closely relating to open questions in the present research. What appears spontaneous, he argues, is often grounded in deeply practiced habits, held in balance with the capacity for immediate adaptability. As John Butcher states, "we do have vocabulary and ingredients but they are malleable enough, if not ever changing, then really fluid at the true moment of creation". Here, interaction is central to creativity: music develops through how individuals and groups

combine their actions and how musicians interact, play, and respond in performance. Exploration is a valued necessity (pp. 156–157).

Turning attention from the practice of free improvisation, Bailey (1993) offers perspectives on idiomatic improvisation contexts, in which improvisation operates within established stylistic and structural frameworks. Bailey observes that North Indian Hindustani music, shaped by cultural hybridity, displays an attitude commonly associated with improvisation: experimental, tolerant of change, and oriented toward development. In a discussion with sitarist Viram Jasani (p. 6), a *raga* performance, a central framework for improvisation in Indian music, is described as a gradual exploratory process shaped by clearly defined structural elements. As Jasani outlines, the performance begins with the non-metric *alapa*, in which the musician slowly explores each tone of the raga's scale. This is followed by the *gat*, where a tabla player enters and improvisation unfolds around a fixed composition aligned with a rhythmic cycle (*tala*), guiding alternating roles of accompaniment and soloing.

An ensuing conversation between the two highlights a question of ownership regarding improvisation:

> Bailey: Does the amount of improvisation used increase as you go on? Would it be possible to say that?
> Jasani: I don't understand what you mean when you say "amount of improvisation used."
> Bailey: Would you introduce more of your own …
> Jasani: The whole thing is one's own. The whole performance is one's own interpretation of that raga.
> (Bailey, 1993, p. 11)

Bailey (1993) identifies jazz as a key force behind the twentieth-century revival of improvisation in Western music, arguing that it reconnected performance with creation and demonstrated that instrumental improvisation can reach the highest levels of expression. Through jazz, he highlights recurring tensions within idiomatic improvisation in general: while imitation is an essential part of the learning process, Bailey cautions that it becomes problematic when the development of individual styles and attitudes grounded in a studied foundation is neglected. Alongside this, he emphasizes the importance of a balancing

concerns for *authenticity* with the naturally innovative dimensions of improvisation. He connects these views with R. Srinivasan's critique in Indian music: "The enemy is mere imitation without imbibing [internalizing] the inspiration which makes the art a living thing" (p.52). Through the voices of jazz musicians Ronnie Scott and Steve Lacy, Bailey frames improvisation as an ongoing, never-ending process that depends on unconscious flow, individual personality, and a continual leap "to the edge" between the known and the unknown (Bailey, 1993, pp. 48-53).

Bailey (1993) highlights a tension faced by improvising musicians across styles: the presence of an audience, and the demand for an "up-to-par" professional performance may lead a musician to confine their playing to safer, more predictable choices within their vocabulary, potentially limiting risk-taking and creative development. His interviews reveal contrasting views on the role of an audience. Paco Peña, a flamenco guitarist (p.12) suggests "playing before [a large] audience is always a compromise". Similarly, Viram Jasani reflects that greater creative freedom is often found in practice rather than performance, where musicians are "not worried about an audience" and can "really let themselves go" (p. 45). In contrast, Ronnie Scott, a jazz musician, insists that improvisation is inseparable from communication, arguing that "if there's no audience it doesn't mean anything" (Bailey, 1993, pp. 44–45).

These perspectives stand in an interesting relation not only to one another, but also to the non-performative stance of *playing for oneself*, as described by Laitinen (1990) and Ilmonen (2014). Further, Jasani's view in particular can be related to understanding how a performance setting may function as an inhibiting factor for flow (Loepthien & Leipold, 2022). Additional performance-related perspectives within composed musics are discussed in the following Section 2.4 in relation to minimalism.

2.4 On minimalism

A minimalist aesthetic is closely connected to the present research through its emphasis on repetition, gradual change, and the reduction of musical material. This section reviews minimalist music with attention to its aesthetic principles, process-based organisation, and non-narrative form. Although minimalism is largely a composed tradition, a shared emphasis on process reveals a point of contact with free improvisatory practices. Minimalist works often suspend or reconfigure goal-directed motion, prompting divergent perceptual accounts and varying interpretations of the music, including how musical desire operates within it, as

well as spiritual or ritualised interpretations. The section additionally incorporates three highly relevant performance-based perspectives.

Minimalism in music, often defined through the works of American composers La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, originated in the late 1950s and developed within a broad network of composers in the United States and Europe throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Potter, Gann, and Ap Siôn, 2013, pp. 1-2). The term itself gained traction in the late 1970s with the widespread successes of Reich and Glass and the ensuing media coverage, prevailing over a host of contemporary labels such as *pulse music, trance music, drone music, modular music, space music, "stuck-record music," and "going-nowhere music"* (Strickland, 1993, p. 245). Today, the label encompasses a wide variety of musical characteristics (Potter et. al., 2013, p. 3) and can be understood variously as an aesthetic, a style, or compositional technique (Johnson, 1994).

Aesthetics & characteristics

Strickland (1993, p. 4) describes minimalism across the arts as a tendency toward stasis, resistance to development, non-allusiveness (a lack of external reference), decontextualisation from tradition, impersonality of tone, and a flattening of perspective, ultimately defining it by "a severity of means, clarity of form, and simplicity of structure and texture." Fink (2005, p. 16) similarly situates musical minimalism within a broader mid-1960s cross-arts movement, the "New Sensibility", which actively resisted interpretation, favouring direct sensory experience over symbolic meaning. In music, additional aesthetic principles are articulated by Broad (1990, p. 52), who distinguishes minimalism through its conception of the musical work as a "*non-narrative work-as-process*", rather than as a fixed object unfolding through linear continuity. Johnson (1994) likewise emphasises minimalism's focus on process itself, arguing that works lacking clear goals or motion toward those goals most clearly exemplify the *aesthetic*, particularly in early minimalism (p. 774). Gann (2013) defines *postminimalism* as music that relaxes strict processual structure while retaining a reduction of material, characterised by mixed compositional techniques. In one of the earlier book-length accounts, Mertens (1983) characterises the four Americans' music as non-representational and "non-dialectical", articulating a "unity of form and content" in which classical musical tensions are suspended (pp. 87-95)

Musically, minimalist works are commonly characterised by a relatively static and tonal harmonic palette, a high degree of repetition, even or absent rhythmic texture, the use of drones, and gradual development through additive, permutational, and phase-shifting processes (Potter et al., 2013, pp. 4–5). Extended melodic lines are typically absent, while structural forms are primarily continuous, often taking the shape of an unbroken flow of rhythmic figuration sustained across the duration of the piece (Johnson, 1994, p. 748). As Potter et al. (2013, p. 7) observe, minimalism is marked by a scarcity of musical events, summarised as "fewer pitches, less contrast, fewer events, less change." Broad (1990, p. 52) argues that this reduction heightens the perceptual significance of small shifts in harmony or texture. Potter et al. (2013) further note that minimalism's sense of time differs from that of most Western music, with "echoes of world traditions such as Indonesian gamelan, Japanese gagaku, and Tibetan chanting" (p. 7).

Mertens (1983) traces minimalism's core features to an "anti-dialectical" tradition within the European avant-garde, extending from serialism to John Cage's search for an "objective" work through aleatoric, chance-based procedures (pp. 95-109). Broad (1990, pp. 52–53), in addressing whether minimalism constitutes a break from or continuation of modernism, emphasises the influence of non-Western musical traditions, particularly Indian, Indonesian, and West African practices, on two key levels: the use of repetitive gestures and the conception of non-narrative musical form. Delaere et al. (2004, pp. 31–32) distinguish between a repetitive strand of minimalism, associated with pattern-based process music such as Steve Reich's, and a reductive, "conceptual" strand exemplified by the works of La Monte Young. Fink (2005), in *Repeating Ourselves,* focuses on the repetitive strand of minimalism, arguing that the music most recognisably "minimal" is in fact "maximally repetitive" (p. x).

Repetition and musical process

David Dies (2013) argues that repetition tends to strip musical gestures, even when initially original, of their sense of novelty, redirecting attention toward slower-moving layers of musical information. Similarly, simplicity of musical gestures, which he refers to as "things the mind already knows," can render them close to non-information (p. 329). In Dies' view, it is precisely through the perception of slight differences within repetition that listeners are drawn into a focused and receptive state (Dies, 2013, p. 333).

Fink (2005) characterizes a common formal pattern in minimalist music as an alternation between static plateaus and sudden shifts. These plateaus are formed through the repetition of cycles that are modulated incrementally by process-driven change, extending long stretches of harmonic and melodic stasis, just enough to hold the listener's attention while "nothing really happens." At times, as if to release accumulated energy, these plateaus give way to moments of release, often marked by decisive harmonic and melodic events, which temporarily restore a sense of linear direction. Fink identifies this pattern in works such as Reich's *Eight Lines* (Fink, 2005, pp. 46, 149, 152).

Fink (2005) observes that the perceptual experience of minimalist music is often verbalised through metaphors of motion in space, such as "flying or gliding over a landscape of gently changing colors and textures" (p. 105). For him, these metaphors capture a central feature of the music, namely the interpenetration of fast and slow temporal layers, in which rapid rhythmic activity unfolds within harmonically static or slowly evolving structures. He cites convergent descriptions of listening to works by Terry Riley and Steve Reich: a "vibrating motionless trance," music heard as either "slow music with rapid ornamentation or fast music with slow underpinnings," and "a constant state of motion while giving an overall feeling of peace and rest" (Mertens, Eno, and La Barbara, cited in Fink, 2005, p. 105).

Perceptual experience and listening modes

Perhaps reflecting the breadth of practices encompassed under the term, minimalism has generated divergent accounts of musical perception, ranging from passive or ambient listening to highly attentive engagement.

Potter, Gann, and Ap Siôn (2013) suggest that listeners typically approach music by tracking familiar structural cues that signal form, direction, or duration. Minimalist works often delay or obscure such cues, a quality that some listeners experience as frustrating and others as liberating, as the task of tracking time or structure recedes. They describe this as an "ambient, globalized kind of listening," and illustrate it by works such as Reich's *Come Out* (1966), Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Pärt's *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* (1977), and Andriessen's *De Materie* (1989). In each work, analytical tracking quickly falters as phasing becomes texture, change becomes perceptible only in hindsight, canonic themes unfold at differing speeds, and repetition generates temporal ambiguity. As they note, "The music's great virtue is that one submits to it, that it seduces us into a kind of sonic meditation

and colours that meditation as we revel in a welcome, relaxing, thought-allaying sense of timelessness" (Potter et al., 2013, pp. 8–9).

In contrast, Philip Duker (2013), through an analysis of Reich's *Drumming* (1971), advocates for an attentive and participatory mode of listening to *process* music. He argues that listeners engage perceptually with compositional techniques such as phase shifting and block addition, actively projecting patterns within the texture. Reich himself, likewise, has rejected characterisations of his music as hypnotic or trance-like, emphasising instead heightened awareness of musical detail (Reich, cited in Fink, 2005, p. 76).

Fink (2005) describes minimalist listening by its fluctuating and intermittent character. Even attentive listeners may drift in and out of the musical process, momentarily "clicking in" during moments of release and losing track during passages that unfold too slowly or regularly to sustain focused attention. According to Fink, the actual experience with the music is often closer to a series of fragmented moments of tension and release, with periods of aimless thought or temporal drift in between (p. 45).

Mertens (1983) emphasises the listener's perception as central to the minimalist work: rather than encountering a finished object, the listener participates in its ongoing construction. The lack of clear teleological progression and an absence of reference points render the relationship between the listener and minimalist music open-ended and ambiguous, making goal-directed listening based on recollection and anticipation largely unsuitable. Mertens proposes instead an "aimless" mode of listening oriented toward *ongoing actualisation*, which he describes as a form of "recollection into the future". Listening becomes open-ended: "Since each moment may be the beginning or the end, the listener can choose how long he wants to listen for, but he will never miss anything by not listening" (p. 90).

Teleology & musical desire

Drawing on Freud and the libidinal philosophies of Deleuze and Lyotard, Mertens (1983) situates minimalist repetition within a framework of desire that departs from narrative resolution and dialectical tension. He describes an ecstatic state induced by minimalist music as "a state of innocence, a hypnotic state, a religious state, created by an independent libido, freed of all restrictions of reality" (p. 123). In this view, repetitive music succeeds when the

listener abandons dialectical, goal-directed listening; ecstasy emerges as the ego lets go (Mertens, 1983, p. 123).

Fink (2005) revisits Mertens' position, noting that Mertens ultimately approaches this libidinal orientation with a measure of caution. He summarises Mertens's account as one in which minimalist repetition privileges moment-to-moment intensity and goalless desiring-production, tending to dissolving subjectivity. While remaining skeptical of readings that frame minimalist repetition as fully anti-teleological or as an escape from desire altogether, Fink further connects Mertens's presentation to a Lacanian, poststructuralist reading of minimalism – and disco, which he groups with other groove-based dance musics as similarly repetitive forms – where repetition is understood as a form of *jouissance*: enjoyment derived not from narrative resolution but from the self-perpetuating circulation of desire itself (Fink, 2005, pp. 37–39). While Fink acknowledges the appeal of this reading, he ultimately treats jouissance as a limited analytical tool, noting that as an experience outside the symbolic order it is, by definition, resistant to articulation and therefore a "blunt hermeneutic instrument" (Fink, 2005, pp. 37–39).

Recombinant teleologies

Refusing a binary opposition between teleological and non-teleological music, Fink proposes the concept of *recombinant teleology* to describe how minimalist repetition reshapes musical desire from goal-directed motion toward a sustained, cyclical mode. In his model, recombinant teleologies depart from classical teleology in two key ways: First, tension–release processes are either stretched across extended durations or reduced to minimal, incremental change, rendering them difficult to perceive as goal-oriented. Second, teleological motion is decoupled from large-scale form: tension–release arcs may organise only portions of the music, begin at arbitrary points, dissipate before resolution, or recur without culmination. This allows for short repeating units, such as single-bar patterns, to remain "cyclically teleological at every moment" while lacking any necessary long-range goal (Fink, 2005, pp. 43–46).

Music with a steady pulse, a tonal centre, and some degree of process is, as Fink (2005) argues, therefore more accurately understood as recombinant rather than truly anti-teleological. He refrains from fully denying the existence of genuinely non-teleological music

in the Western tradition, explicitly exempting ambient music and the works of John Cage and La Monte Young (p. 43).

Spirituality and ritual

Dies (2013) associates minimalism with experiences of stillness and calmness, particularly in works such as Fratres (1977) by Arvo Pärt. Drawing parallels with spiritual practices, he links long sustained drones to South Indian Carnatic music and Byzantine chant, and recurring musical gestures to the call-and-response structure of a litany, noting that a sense of ritual emerges with as little as two repetitions of a rhythm at the onset of the piece (p. 329). As Dies writes, in Fratres the alternation of sound and silence encourages attentive listening to silence itself, while additive processes and the balancing of descending and ascending melodic motion create a condition in which musical actions are continually enacted and undone. Dies connects the resulting sense of stasis and stillness to a passive and receptive mode of listening, which he further relates to *hesychia*, the Orthodox Christian practice of inner stillness (p. 331).

Steve Reich, as cited in Fink (2005, p. 207), finds a ritualistic dimension in a heightened and actively attentive engagement with gradual musical process in minimalist music, a position that can be perhaps read alongside Csikszentmihalyi's (2004) account of flow as a state in which attention is so fully absorbed in an activity that ordinary self-awareness recedes (see also Section 2.2).

> "While performing and listening to gradual musical processes one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from he and she and you and me outwards towards *it*." (Reich, cited in Fink, 2005, p. 207)

Performance perspectives

Performance accounts of minimalist music emphasise the embodied, attentional, and temporal demands placed on performers. Russell Hartenberger (2016) argues that performing Steve Reich's music requires the development of what he terms a "different kind of virtuosity," centred on concentration, endurance, rhythmic precision, and the management of repetition and metrical ambiguity over extended durations (pp. 374). Discussing *Clapping Music* (1972), he notes that performers must internalise rhythmic patterns to the point of

detachment from their physical execution, sustaining consistency while remaining perceptually open to shifting composite rhythms and background pulses (Hartenberger, 2016, p. 379). Reich, as cited by Hartenberger, similarly characterises effective performance as emerging only once the material has become fully embodied, resulting in an "automatic and un-thought-about" mode of playing achieved through prolonged practice (Reich, cited in Hartenberger, 2016, p. 374). At this level of competence, performance moves beyond correctness toward what Reich describes as a form of musical "magic," in which bodily and mental processes align without conscious control.

John Harle (2016) describes an ideal minimalist performance as one in which the performer is "outside the music, looking in," able to perform with emotional intensity while also "standing back" from oneself and the music, remaining aware of its effect on the audience and taking responsibility for audience perception (p. 381). When this balance is achieved, Harle suggests, a strong performer–audience connection can emerge, at times producing a shared state of near bliss, which he associates with experiences of flow, "possession," and suspended temporal perception.

For Sarah Cahill (2016), sustaining the "spell of minimalism" requires allowing the music sufficient time and space to unfold while remaining undisturbed by audience impatience – a challenge she attributes to some listeners experiencing the music as pointless and overly long (pp. 385–386). She further notes that mistakes carry particular weight in minimalist performance, demanding focus, consistency, and endurance supported through movement and variation. Cahill advocates a livelier and looser performance mode in contrast to the more unexpressive aesthetics associated with 1970s minimalism, arguing that performers must "find the motion in stasis, find freshness in repetition, and seduce with our own conviction" (p. 387).

3 Conceptual framework

Long aesthetic

In this research, *long aesthetic* is understood as sustained continuity: a mode of musical thinking and practice grounded in continuity rather than extended structure or great length as such. It designates an aesthetic condition in which continuity, variation, and low event density allow musical experience to shift from progression toward presence, from a sequence

of events to an ongoing state. Music becomes spatial not instantaneously but gradually, as continuity replaces progression and attention shifts from anticipating change to dwelling within what is ongoing. Long aesthetic can be understood as a precondition for the dissolution of event-based listening toward the emergence of what is here referred to as music as space.

As discussed in Section 2.1, in Finnish folk music discourse, *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic) carries stylistic characteristics that support this orientation. These include extended duration, a degree of musical minimalism, and the principle of continuous variation (Haapoja 2017, p. 171), as well as what Ilmonen (2014, p. 20) describes as endlessly varying, sparsely pitched, extended forms of singing and playing that exist outside the bounds of a musical piece. These practices are closely connected to a non-presentational mode of musicking, characterised by an inward, internalised orientation rather than audience-directed performance (Laitinen 1990, pp. 250–251; Ilmonen 2014, p. 20). Pitkä estetiikka is closely connected to a spatial conception of music, as articulated by Heikki Laitinen (2000): "music is, in a way, a space that one enters and exits, but the music itself never really begins or ends; it simply is."

Music as space

Building on this understanding, *music as space* is used in this research to describe a mode of musical organisation and perception in which sound is experienced as an ongoing, inhabitable situation. Music is approached as something one may enter, dwell within, and exit without loss of coherence or meaning. Instead of guiding the listener through progression, tension–release, or formal arrival, musical meaning arises from presence within the ongoing musical moment, a reduced importance of past and future musical events. In this research, such a spatial experience of music is sought for through a sustained continuity of an ongoing rhythmic flow.

While Laitinen (2000) describes music as "a space that one enters and exits," in an earlier related context he articulates a close relationship between the moment and eternity, framing them as "two aspects of the same musical tone". Related perspectives can be found in a rejection of linear development within European modernism; Belgian composer Karel Goeyvaerts proposed in 1953 a static, non-developmental conception of musical time as an "immobility of being" (Delaere et al., 2004), later followed by Karlheinz Stockhausen**'s** *moment form*, in which an experiential sense of eternity is accessible at any moment through

intensified focus on the *now* (Mertens, 1983). These perspectives demonstrate that stasis and presence may emerge through dense or dissonant sound worlds.

Within ambient music, spatiality arises from the absence of a foreground; the shedding of a sonic focal point allows sound to function as an environment rather than as an object of attention (Talbot, 2019, pp. 75–76). Talbot further conceptualises musical space as physical, sonic, and psychological: written into musical texture, shaped through sound treatment, and completed in the listener's perception (Talbot, 2019, pp. 68–69). Brian Eno's oft-cited description of ambient music as being "as ignorable as it is interesting" (Eno, 1978) underscores how a spatial organisation of music enables varying modes of listening attention.

Spatial metaphors recur in accounts of listening to minimal music, often described as motion over a slowly evolving sound field, accompanied by experiences of timelessness and shifts between attention and distraction (Fink, 2005; Potter et al., 2013). Minimalist listening modes are variously described as ambient, globalised, meditative, or non-teleological, while also including calls for active listening to processual detail, alongside doubts as to whether such listening can be sustained (Potter et al., 2013; Mertens, 1983; Duker, 2013; Fink, 2005). Taken together, these accounts highlight musical perception as a highly subjective and contextual experience, particularly in relation to less directional musical forms.

David Toop (1995) points to Claude Debussy's encounter with Javanese gamelan in 1889 as the onset of a European musical orientation toward stasis, colour, and atmosphere, or more broadly toward music likenable to *wandering within a landscape*, a broader historical development he explores in *Ocean of Sound* (pp. 17–20). Within minimalism, Elaine Broad (1990) emphasises Indian, Indonesian, and West African musical practices as key sources for non-narrative and cyclical, repetitive approaches. By contrast, Robert Fink (2005) connects key aspects of the minimalist aesthetic to twentieth-century developments in low-engagement listening in the US and, ultimately, to the "colourful repetitive excess of postindustrial, mass-mediated consumer society." Laitinen (2000) concludes that spatial and long-aesthetic conceptions of music are not exceptional but globally widespread, suggesting that such orientations gradually receded from prominence in European musical thought after the seventeenth century. From this perspective, music as space is not an innovation but a re-emergence of older ways of relating sound, time, and presence, within a modern cultural environment.

Rhythmic framework

For the verbalisation of this research, a set of rhythmic concepts and terms is used, as outlined below.

- *Rhythmic continuity* refers to the maintenance of an ongoing rhythmic flow that unfolds in a coherent and uninterrupted manner and feels satisfying to listen to – in other words, it *feels good.*
- *Rhythmic flow* refers to the ongoing state of rhythmic activity that happens over time.
- A *rhythmic cycle* refers to a repeating temporal pattern in a general sense: a temporal container within which variation may occur, akin to meter.
- *Rhythmic weave* describes the combined structure formed by multiple repeating rhythmic layers articulated by the drum set within a rhythmic cycle.
- *Ostinato* refers to an unchanging repeating pattern. In drum set practice, ostinatos function as a foundational device, as exemplified in John Riley's *The Art of Bop Drumming* (1994), where a drummer is instructed to vary different voices of the drum set against an unchanging, repeating ride-cymbal pattern.

The notion of rhythmic continuity in this research includes an experiential dimension. The sense of satisfaction, or "feel-good," associated with rhythmic activity is closely connected with the notion of *groove*, which in empirical research denotes a pleasurable urge to move to music when its rhythmic qualities are perceived as "just right." This urge is strongest when rhythmic patterns combine temporal stability with an optimal amount of syncopation (Witek et al., 2014), together with an appropriate number of interacting rhythmic layers (Seeberg et al., 2025). This balance is often described in terms of predictive processes, in which pleasure emerges from the interplay between expectation and surprise within an internalised underlying rhythmic structure (Seeberg et al., 2025).

To further contextualise this "feel-good" quality, the concept of groove can also be approached from a conceptual viewpoint. In Abel's (2014) definition, groove depends on an even pulse with minimal temporal fluctuation. Temporal expression may occur in relation to the pulse, but the overall pulse of the music is not permitted to fluctuate noticeably. He goes on to define groove through three additional elements: syncopation, multi-levelled meter, and the concept of back-beat, ultimately arguing that groove is a way of organising musical time that is historically specific to twentieth-century popular music (pp. 18-60). However, these

considerations lie outside the scope of the present research. Although applicable in many situations, I have refrained from using the term *groove* in this study to describe rhythmic patterns or their qualities, due to its multiple uses and stylistic associations.

4 Research design

4.1 Methodology

This research examines how a long-aesthetic rhythmic continuity can be cultivated on the drum set, focusing on both practical and conceptual concerns within open-ended improvisational contexts. To address these questions, the study adopts an artistic research methodology.

In this research the practice of drumming serves both as the method of inquiry and as the primary site of knowledge production. Artistic research, as articulated by Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén (2014), is grounded in exploration through artistic practice: research takes place within and through the acts that constitute the practice itself (pp. 3–4). However, artistic activity alone does not yet constitute artistic research; reflection, articulation, and verbalisation of the artistic process, together with performative work, are essential in transforming artistic practice into research (Hannula et al., 2014, pp. xi, 3-4, 28).

The phenomena in focus – musical time as an ongoing state, bodily experience, sustained rhythmic continuity, and improvisational decision-making – cannot be understood through abstract description alone, but become apparent in the embodied practice of drumming and collective musicking. Insight is accumulated in the act of playing, in interaction with other musicians, and through attentive reflection in and after these situations. These considerations justify artistic research as an appropriate methodological framework.

4.2 Data Generation

The research material consists of my artistic practice between early 2024 and mid-2025. The material consists of experiences in group rehearsals, performances and personal practice, along with a body of recorded material and a collection of written notes documenting insights from along the way. In line with artistic research methodology (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2014, pp. 3–4), embodied and experiential knowledge accumulated through artistic practice forms an integral part of the research. Shifting between performer and listener perspectives

took place throughout the process through review of recorded video material, which informed the ongoing artistic process as well as contributed to the accumulation of experiential and conceptual insight. Feedback and reflective discussions following performances offered external perspectives that informed the ongoing development of the research.

2024: Early work and duo performance

The research grew out of an exploration of a musical space that, to me, seemed to arise from sustained drumming with cyclic, repeating rhythms; a space created through repetition, duration, subtle variation of rhythmic patterns, and a sense of settlement or peace that develops as a pattern continues over time. Initial steps in developing this approach further were taken in spring 2024 during preparation for an intermediary concert for my studies. Early on I considered exploring these rhythmic spaces as a solo act. However, I was fortunate to have met Juho Tuomainen, a guitarist meddling with improvised ambient music, who agreed to join me in preparing a duo performance that was later presented in May 2024 under the title *Time and Space*. This music combined my emerging idea of drumming as an ongoing state with Juho's concept of improvised ambient music, exploring different forms of interaction between the two layers. Rehearsal sessions were held and recorded during March, April and May 2024.

While preparation for the concert focused largely on improvising open spaces together, during the spring I had considered preparing a predetermined rhythmic framework consisting of personally timely and relevant rhythms. On my part, the performance in May 2024 balanced improvisation and a loosely precomposed rhythmic progression that I had prepared to guide me in the continuous 30-minute performance: beginning with an adaptation of *samai* – a Middle Eastern 10/4 rhythm introduced to me at the start of my studies in the programme – that gradually evolved toward a "samai-afrobeat" hybrid, a pattern that emerged from rhythmic materials I had been playing at the time and I enjoyed playing. The concert was recorded, reviewed and reflected on in written form.

Feedback and reflective discussions following the 2024 duo performance provided an important perspective on the work that highlighted aspects of listener perception and immersion, as well as raised seemingly contrasting prompts for both reduced variation and increased risk-taking ("less stuff, more fire"). This earlier period of artistic practice provided guidance, a conceptual foundation, and technical preparation for continued work in 2025.

2025: Trio rehearsals and data generation

In early spring 2025, I organised a call for musicians interested in slow, extended improvisation. After an initial phase of two sessions with varying groups, this process crystallised into a trio with Juho Tuomainen and vocalist Teea Aarnio, with whom we met weekly throughout the spring of 2025. The trio explored long, spacious, open musical environments through collective improvisation. Each session typically consisted of two continuous improvised "spaces" of approximately 45–60 minutes each, within which attending to a rhythmic continuity remained my primary musical focus. These trio sessions functioned simultaneously as artistic practice, as experimental environments, and as sites of knowledge production, in line with the understanding of artistic research as taking place within and through practice itself (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2014, pp. 3-4).

Guided by earlier work, several drumming-related concepts and sub-questions were in focus.

- Ostinati in creating continuity
- Repetition and the balance between variation and interruption
- Temporal and dynamic stability
- Bodily ease, flow, focus, and presence
- Technical, timbral, and dynamic choices
- Structural or formal decisions

During spring 2025, I made mental and occasional written notes concerning personal shortcomings and successes, physical sensations, experiences of flow and emerging technical, textural, and conceptual insights. During this time, my drumming practice was guided by these notes, the sub-questions listed above, and informal review of recorded video material inbetween sessions.

Rhythmic material

During the process between 2024 and 2025, various adaptations of several rhythmic frameworks were mixing and matching in my drumming practice, at different stages of embodied familiarity. Many of these rhythms had been introduced to me through personal

encounters in recent years, such as a crossed 2-against-3 system (*atravesao*)[2] as taught by Nicolás Castañeda Lozano; *Maracatu*-based[3] rhythms introduced by Adriano Adewale; and the *Sangura*[4] rhythm, as taught by Kasheshi Makena. These influences are present in the recorded material across the research project, alongside elements drawn from samba and bossa nova, clave-based and Afro-Cuban patterns, and the general pulse-feel associated with these styles. Further rhythmic sources include African-derived 12/8 and related triplet-based patterns, the 10/4 meter of Samai, as well as elements of backbeat-oriented grooves and background in jazz drumming.

Audio and video documentation 2024-2025

The duo sessions of spring 2024 were recorded in audio format, and the Time and Space concert on 15.5.2024 was recorded on video from an audience view.

The trio sessions of spring 2025 were recorded using a Zoom Q2n-4K video/audio recorder, positioned to capture continuous video of my playing and audio of the whole trio. A video recording of the trio's public performance in May 2025, captured from a similar drum-focused camera perspective, was also included in the retrospective video analysis.

Audio and video documentation and subsequent analysis allowed the artistic process to be revisited and articulated. Video material enabled close observation of how specific techniques, sounds, timbral choices, and bodily states support or disrupt a sense of continuity.

4.3 Data analysis

An artistic research is conducted through an insider-perspective, which means that data analysis happens throughout the process, not exclusively as a distinct separated stage (Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2014, p. 16). Analytical work took place on two complementary levels.

First, analysis occurred continuously during the artistic process itself. While rehearsing with the group, performing, and practicing between sessions, I reflected on my playing through

[2] *Atravesao*: A rhythmic pattern associated with the joropo style in Colombian-Venezuelan Llanera music from the Orinoco region of South America (N. Castañeda Lozano, personal communication, 2026).
[3] *Maracatu*: A family of Afro-Brazilian musical traditions originating in Pernambuco, Brazil
[4] 4 *Sangura*: A rhythm associated with the Wapogoro people of Tanzania. (K. Makena, personal communication, 2026)

bodily sensation, listening, and review of recorded material. Reflective discussions took place during the group sessions. This ongoing, practice-based analysis informed my musical decisions both in real time and in a longer perspective, continually guiding the artistic process.

Second, a systematic retrospective analysis of the 2025 video material was conducted after the rehearsal and performance period in spring 2025 had concluded. At this stage, I viewed all recorded trio rehearsals and produced time-stamped written notes for each recording. These notes documented the rhythms and patterns I was playing, noticeable changes and gradual development in my playing, as well as any other moments that stood out. The resulting written timelines captured shifts in technique, sound, texture, bodily ease or tension, and moments of variation, interruption, and continuity. In addition to descriptive observations, the notes included interpretive comments informed by my understanding of my own technical possibilities and limitations, perceptual impressions as a listener, and emerging conceptual insights.

The retrospective video analysis enabled close examination of:

- movement and body language
- improvisational decision-making, including technical, dynamic, timbral and structural choices
- moments of change, transition, hesitation, or technical challenge
- the stability or instability of rhythmical patterns and their relation to bodily ease or tension
- interaction between the drum part and the ensemble texture
- resulting musical and perceptual effects

The written notes were produced in dialogue with embodied and experiential knowledge developed during the project. Prior to the systematic video analysis, a set of preliminary findings had already been formed through rehearsals, performances, personal practice, and ongoing reflection across 2024 and 2025. These preliminary insights shaped the retrospective viewing of the recordings by providing an orientation, or “ideal,” against which the observed material was evaluated.

Written notes from the video analysis were then reviewed through an open, interpretive process informed by the research questions and accumulated practice-based knowledge. The notes were organised around recurring themes related to the research questions, such as continuity, variation, bodily ease, dynamic control, and improvisational decision-making. Through this process, patterns, tendencies, and critical moments were identified across the material, allowing the preliminary findings accumulated through practice to be examined, refined, and expanded. Finally, written material from the video analysis was synthesised with all existing research material, including previously written reflections from along the process.

The final themes under which the findings are presented in chapter 5 are:

- Group orientation and general conceptual thinking
- Feel good
- Headroom and improvisation
- What to play
- Change
- Dynamic and timbral

4.4 Researcher Position

I am both the researcher and the primary performer in this study. This positioning aligns with principles of artistic research as described by Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén (2014, p. 16), in which the researcher operates as an embedded practitioner within the artistic practice. My interest in long-aesthetic drumming and sustained rhythmic continuity arises directly from my own artistic practice and long-term engagement with rhythm, repetition, and improvisation. The research questions are closely tied to my personal artistic motivations and lived experience as a musician. This insider position shapes all stages of the research, from the formulation of questions to the generation, analysis, and interpretation of the research material.

The research participants consist of two fellow musicians with whom I collaborated in improvised performance and rehearsal contexts. These collaborators were not treated as research subjects but as artistic partners in a shared exploratory process. While I initiated the project and defined its overall focus, the musical outcomes emerged through collective improvisation and mutual listening.

4.5 Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with the principles of reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability, as outlined in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) guidelines (TENK, 2023 p. 11).

Participation in the research was voluntary. Collaborating musicians were informed about the aims of the research, the use of audio and video recordings, and the focus on my own artistic practice rather than on evaluating the contributions of others. All recordings were made with the knowledge and consent of the participants. The audio and video recordings were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. The recordings were used for research, reflection, and documentation of the artistic process and research outcomes. Any sharing of recorded material outside the research context, such as excerpts shared in artistic or public platforms, occurred only with the knowledge and consent of all participants.

The personal data involved in the research was limited to identifiable audio and video recordings of musical activity. No health, political, or other sensitive personal information was collected. Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process through informed consent, transparency, respectful collaboration, and responsible data handling.

5 Findings

The findings of this research project are organised across a set of layers that reflect both the conceptual framing of the project and the practical realities of long-aesthetic drumming. The analysis moves from a shared orientation toward music as space, through embodied and technical conditions that supported rhythmic continuity, to strategies for change within continuity, and finally to mental and perceptual orientations that enabled sustained immersion in group improvisation.

Firstly, within this research, drumming attained an immersive, spatial sense of continuity by being enveloped in the improvised soundscaping of my creative collaborators, Teea Aarnio (electro-acoustic vocals) and Juho Tuomainen (ambient, guitar-based textures). Developed through looping, layering, and electronic sound processing, this collaboratively improvised

sound field framed rhythmic material as part of a shared environment rather than as an isolated layer. The findings therefore relate not only to personal drumming practice but to experiences within these shared musical spaces: how to drum in this context, practically and conceptually.

5.1 Group orientation and general conceptual thinking

Group discussions reinforced a shared orientation toward music understood as a scene or space rather than as a sequence of events with directional logic. The improvised spaces were characterised by continuous and repeating elements – loops, cycles, and drum patterns – within which layers could be added, modified, or removed by each musician at their creative will. My aim within this was to shape and sustain an ongoing rhythmic flow in a way that supported a sense of continuity.

To conceptualise change in and the nature of these improvised spaces, I found the metaphor of dropping small pebbles into water useful. In an ongoing musical field, individual musical actions could be understood as creating ripples that, as they dissolve into a larger temporal field, affect all things within it. Changes in one voice, however minute, transform the context against which all other sounds are perceived. In this sense, musical activity was always contextual, with each contribution subtly reshaping the shared sound space.

In my view, this supported a distinction between “event-based playing”, where musical gestures demand attention, and a “spatial” approach to playing, in which continuity and repetition, a certain “uneventfulness”, contribute to a sense of space. Sounds could function not only as an action within the space but as part of the space itself. While not absolute, thinking in these terms proved to be a helpful conceptual guide for my drumming within these musical environments.

5.2 Feel-good

A central aspect at the onset of this research was orienting my playing toward finding meaning in a repeating rhythmic cycle rather than in change, complexity, or progression. The most satisfying moments in the reviewed video material were those where I stayed with a rhythmic weave for a long time, varying it only minimally or developing it with intention within a relatively narrow frame.

For a rhythmic weave to be sustainable in this way, it had to feel good to play and to listen to in the moment. Rhythms that did not feel good tended to provoke a desire for change, while a rhythm that felt good, seemed to *call* for repetition, as if it wanted to continue as it was. In the review, musically settled moments often coincided with observably relaxed body language, minimal unnecessary movement in the limbs, and a visible sense of an embodied pulse. Physical tension or visible uncertainty were often accompanied by musical instability.

I came to think of a repeating rhythmic cycle that felt particularly good playfully as a *wholesome embodied cycle*: a constellation of movements experienced as a single cycle, returning again and again. A supporting strategy for instilling a rhythmic cycle with a sense of calm was a subtle, pendulum-like head movement – something I had practiced as a way of "dancing" the pulse – that helped me "watch over" an ongoing rhythm. This seemed to invite a sense of ease and stability into the playing, particularly in textures with a lot of movement. From these experiences, a quality of "stillness in motion" emerged: stillness arising from their similarity over time, and motion from their continuous enactment.

5.3 Headroom and improvisation

Technical ease was essential for continuity. Rhythmic patterns and motor combinations that remained well within my abilities – free of strain and without difficulty in inter-limb coordination – allowed attention to shift from execution to listening, supported consistency in timing and dynamics, and enabled rhythmic flow to persist with minimal conscious effort. Reviewing the material, these contributed to a rhythmic flow being satisfying to listen to. Technical ease reduced pressure to introduce change driven by strain or coordination difficulty, and ultimately allowed extended durations.

Such headroom in technique allowed optionality in variating and reshaping rhythmic patterns without introducing tension into the rhythmic flow through excessive problem-solving. This was essential in an open improvisatory approach to playing, which inevitably led to combinations that were less familiar. Following intuitive aspirations in a gradually transforming improvised space brought me to play things that stretched my technical and motor abilities. In these situations, it was essential to attain continuity in the relevant voices of the ongoing rhythmic weave and to maintain temporal, timbral, and dynamic consistency. I dubbed this space that was outside a thoroughly familiar technical comfort zone as "improvising at the event horizon": a space in which challenges in coordination could still be

worked out without giving rise to interruptive events that disrupt the ongoing rhythmic continuity. With these technical limitations in mind, *continuability* emerged as something to consider across all introduced ideas.

Managing the tension between an ideal of effortless ease and the realities of improvisation was a key aspect in the research. Short-lived and tentative changes were a main concern regarding continuity in the review of recorded material. Patterns near or at the limits of my abilities often introduced tension through inconsistencies in timing and dynamics, weakening the rhythmic flow in the moment as well as constraining the range of my available musical choices, leading to hesitation, untimely change, or unintended breaks between different voices within the drum set.

A roadmap?

Following a loosely premeditated rhythmic roadmap was an option I considered and experimented with in relation to performance situations. This had its benefits in contributing to a coherent continuity, reducing moments of searching and limiting technical uncertainty, while still enabling many of the qualities I sought in this line of musicking. However, I found little use for this approach in the context of weekly group improvisation sessions, which increasingly took on the character of a practice undertaken for its own sake. With a closing performance in mind, it did not make sense to differ too much from this practice. The resulting approach fell somewhere between open-ended improvisation and the use of familiar, embodied starting points, as described below.

5.4 What to play?

The freedom to establish a rhythm of my choosing at the beginning of an improvisation allowed me to play patterns at tempi where they would naturally "sit" in my hands, which contributed to a sense of ease and continuity from outset. In terms of what to play, a meaningful and practical approach was to work with rhythmic material that was relevant and timely to me in other areas of my musical life, in other contexts or personal practice. In the group settings, timely rhythms in my body and mind were recontextualised in unexpected and interesting ways by the evolving sound spaces. The sessions offered a particularly meaningful environment to spend time with a rhythm, settle into it, exploring how it felt, how it could be sustained and improvised with without losing continuity.

Rhythmic material recognisably present in the research material includes, among others, rhythms drawn from Colombian, Afro-Cuban, and Brazilian traditions, alongside African-derived 12/8 patterns and grooves drawing from hip hop contexts (see Section 4.2). With all of these shaped through past studies and personal encounters, I had existing embodied rhythmic material connected to stylistic specifics that contributed to a base layer of an intuitive improvisatory vocabulary. I recognise my position as a cultural outsider to these traditions and the complexities connected to recontextualising rhythms removed from their traditional settings.

Rhythmic material that was familiar and deeply embodied through long-term use, requiring little cognitive effort to sustain, supported an effortless sense of flow, as well as improvised variation and extended durations. Energetically flowing patterns with a strong sense of forward motion proved particularly effective when enveloped by slowly evolving surrounding sound and instilled with a sense of peace and calm.

Ostinato

Building on standard drum set practices, ostinato-based playing, understood here as habitual, embodied, and relatively low-attention rhythmic patterns, was central in my approach for sustaining rhythmic continuity. This could take simple forms, such as an even pulse on my left foot, more specific practiced patterns such as a 2-against-3 foot ostinato, or a brush "shaker"-ostinato in my right hand. Having two voices providing a rhythmic base layer often worked well, establishing a strong sense of ongoing static cycle, while leaving 2 additional voices for additional, perhaps more "cognitive" contributions. An effortless rhythmic ground enabled attention to shift toward shaping the rhythmic weave in various ways, recurring thematic playing, or timbral variation, and importantly, listening.

More generally, the idea that different rhythmic voices within a repeating cycle could act independently – each beginning, varying, transforming, or fading out on its own – opened up wide possibilities for exploration: Voices could begin, vary, transform or fade out or a voice could change roles from being "cognitively" played into a receding into an ostinato, and vice versa, provided I had the technical abilities. Managing these creative aspirations against my motor abilities with particular rhythms was a central factor. Voices would often break when I could not maintain them while varying or introducing another element. Ostinatos that were physically comfortable and motorically stable could be sustained over long durations and

supported improvisation in other limbs. The degree of freedom I had for variation elsewhere was closely tied to how deeply a pattern had been practiced and how thoroughly I had explored different combinations around it.

Treating an improvised, novel pattern as an ostinato and soon introducing variation in another voice was mostly not feasible. I would quickly reach the limits of my abilities and enter a mode of “practicing on the fly”. When an ostinato required excessive attention, a familiar pattern of effects emerged: unintended breaks, temporal and dynamic instability, and a heightened impulse to change material, all reducing immersion.

5.5 Change

Holding continuity as a central value, I found it useful to think of change in the rhythmic flow in two main ways: *variation*, understood as small “non-sticky” deviations that essentially keep or return to an *ongoing state,* and as *reconfiguration*, understood as reshaping that state into a new one through lasting adjustments. Alongside this division, two additional strategies emerged: *Recurring thematic playing* involved developing a habit of repeating an improvised idea in search of a short phrase that could be sustained and subtly varied over time. "Repeat, recall, reintroduce" was a helpful notion in making sense of the rhythmic themes I had played within an improvised space. Occasional, widely spaced *“comet-like” events* could imply a longer cycle without establishing a formal one, such as a recurring cymbal wash in the recording of a session on 8.5.25, spaced at roughly one-minute intervals, which in retrospect seemed perfectly placed.

Reviewing recorded material supported an aesthetic intuition to play in way that minimises perceptual "questions" posed for an immersed listener. Changes that could be perceived simply as "this is it for now" minimised this questioning. Decisiveness at the moment of introducing material was closely tied to this. Voices, patterns, themes, variations or reconfigurations, however minute, that were introduced with intention and confidence tended to raise the least attentive questioning. In contrast, “trying out” material without following through often resulted in unwanted variation and undermined continuity. Even bolder changes, such as new timbral elements or rhythmic shifts, read as coherent when they were committed to and given time to stabilise.

Variation and reconfiguration

Short gestures such as brief fills or short cymbal swells added liveliness when spaced appropriately, and at times seemed to function as if release valves for accumulated energy. In contrast, longer fills and extended cymbal swells tended to generate anticipation and tension, pulling the music toward an event-based logic. Improvised variation over an unchanging ostinato was a foundational strategy and could enrich the flow, provided that the ostinato itself remained intact. The appropriate frequency and scale of variation depended on context. Denser textures could accommodate more activity, while sparse settings called for restraint. When variation became perceptually part of an ongoing state, even quite playful expression could occur without breaking continuity.

Reconfiguration involved reshaping an ongoing state into a new one through lasting adjustments, such as changing texture, timbre, or rhythmic material. Gradual layering of new material in one limb while others remained unchanged enabled transformation without interruption. Conceptualising these changes as new ongoing states helped rein in impulses to play isolated gestures or short-lived ideas. Allowing a rhythmic weave to persist long enough for it to "become what it is" proved essential for grounding new ongoing states. Successful reconfiguration often stemmed from embodied familiarity rather than cognitive planning, as changes that required excessive problem-solving often introduced tension and disrupted flow.

Forms of metric modulations were explored as a way of introducing larger-scale rhythmic change. Thoroughly embodied patterns and ostinatos provided fluidity that enabled me to introduce metrically ambiguous material while tending to an ongoing flow of rhythm. Change seemed least obtrusive when it emerged from a metrically ambiguous state, such as a short repeating 3/8 figure without a clearly articulated underlying pulse. From such a state, the introduction of a periodically even voice could imply a pulse, a polyrhythmic overlay, or something in between, eventually recontextualising ongoing material within a new metric orientation. While bold changes were not fully excluded, they required commitment and subsequent time for a new state of things to settle.

5.6 Dynamic and timbral

A number of timbral and dynamic considerations supported the integration of drums into surrounding textures and contributed to repetition remaining pleasant over longer spans.

Developing greater control and freedom in playing at relatively lower dynamic levels supported both of these aims. This also allowed space for other voices in the improvisation and helped foster a settled atmosphere in both personal practice and group settings. A good starting point for a session was to “play decisively, but softly; intentionally, but not eventfully.”

Texturally, softer sound sources such as brushes, mallets, towel-dampened drums, and hand and finger playing were generally easier to integrate than conventional stick-based articulation. Timbral exploration widened the available sound palette and included using plywood as an alternate brush-playing surface, playing the snare drum’s underside head with fingers, attaching and growing accustomed to a set of bells around my left thigh, tuning a cowbell, and miking a cymbal’s edge to produce a sustained drone. The tone and tuning of the drums took on heightened importance in sparse improvisational spaces. Familiarity with the available sound palette reduced moments of searching.

Louder, sharper, or highly articulated sounds, such as snare drum rimshots or ride cymbal bell ostinatos, were not inherently problematic, but highlighted the importance of dynamic control and contextual awareness. In relatively low-volume settings, stick-based playing called for refined technical control. A developing "side-to-side" technique enabled me to play at very low dynamic levels and enhanced my one-handed rhythmic abilities. Using heel-down foot technique minimised excess movement and provided fine dynamic control into the barely audible, allowing me to fade sounds in and out.

5.8 Mental considerations

“Don’t break it”

At times, the successful creation of a coherent, immersive musical space led me to feel a sense of restraint, rooted in a fear of “breaking” a fragile space through unsolicited changes in the rhythmic flow. This sense of confinement limited my perceived musical options and ability to respond to the music freely. This tension was often connected to technical or motor-related issues and was less present when I had sufficient technical headroom. Helpful, too, was to keep in mind that simply letting a rhythmic flow continue was more than sufficient.

Non-reactive stance

Relating to group improvisation, I occasionally felt that I was not answering the music's "calls" as I perceived them – impulses to respond that arose in relation to what my collaborating musicians were doing. These calls might take the form of a darker timbre, an increase in intensity, or a shift in volume that seemed to invite a corresponding change in my playing. At times, this created uncertainty about what to do amid these calls and the ongoing task of enacting a somewhat unchanging rhythmic texture.

I came to recognise these impulses as largely learned, stemming from deeply embodied habits rather than musically necessary in this context. What I felt inclined to respond to was likely already a change, an event that had entered the space and was recontextualising existing material, including my own playing. Adding further response risked over-articulation and the accumulation of events, pulling the music toward a more directional logic.

Choosing not to react and simply continuing with what was happening often proved musically effective. A non-reactive stance encouraged me to first explore what I was already playing as it appeared in a different light, a changing sound space. This supported continuity and enabled me to remain more fully immersed in the music through a reduced cognitive load.

Closely related was an internalised illusion that something must change even when sustained repetition was musically powerful. In group practice, variations introduced by others, together with the interaction of loops and cycles of differing lengths, continuously renewed the resulting texture without additional intervention.

Open listening

Group work and peer discussions evoked a shift in my mode of listening to the music as it was being improvised. This took the form of an open listening stance, where the music did not need to become anything specific. Accepting that "whatever is, is" allowed the improvisational process to unfold without pressure toward goals, development, or predetermined outcomes. An open musical environment could accommodate contributions of many shapes and sizes, with its resulting character and effect simply reshaped by the actions taking place within it. This did not entail that anything goes; my sense of agency was in how I engaged with what was currently present in the sound field.

Mindset

A settled mindset was important to appreciate a relatively static sound field with a limited number of musical events. In this sense, it functioned both as a precondition for the playing and as an outcome of it. Both in personal practice and in group settings, the first minutes of playing often brought about this shift in me on their own, establishing an appropriate mental and embodied state. Over the course of the process, I grew increasingly accustomed to this circular relationship, and the group practice became a valued weekly occasion, perhaps even something akin to a ritual.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to find and explore practical and conceptual approaches to playing the drum set in a manner that supports a continuous rhythmic flow within open improvised musical spaces. A range of such practical and conceptual approaches were found and explored during the research process, as described in the previous section. Spending the autumn of 2025 reading relevant literature deepened my understanding of these topics, with the concept of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic) in Finnish folk music and perspectives from minimalism offering closely related insights into continuous variation, repetition, and the effects of reduced musical material. The following discussion reflects on the findings in relation to the reviewed literature, addressing themes of ease, improvisation, and group contexts, as well as conceptions of music as a space and the role of the drums within it. It further considers the question of being "in" or "outside" the music, before concluding with a discussion of a ritual-like dimension that emerged in practice.

Ease

A central concern, starting point, and foundational aspect of this research was the importance of ease in making a rhythm feel good and consistent over time, without unintended or forced change due to technical limitations. This notion is paralleled by Hartenberger's description of effective performance in minimalism as emerging only once musical material has become fully embodied, resulting in an "automatic and un-thought-about" mode of playing achieved through prolonged practice (Reich, cited in Hartenberger, 2016, p. 374). While the music in this research was largely improvised, one could argue that it is the same "magic" (Reich) or "spell" (Cahill, 2016, p. 386) of minimalism that was sought after in the continuity of the rhythmic flow. A particularly resonant parallel within minimalism is articulated by Sarah Cahill (2016), who writes that "we need to find the motion in stasis, find freshness in repetition, and seduce with our own conviction" (p. 387).

This state of ease with rhythm also closely aligns with psychological accounts of flow. Biasutti and Habe (2023) describe musical flow as a state of bodily and mental harmony in which ease supports expressiveness, imagination, and experimentation. They also note that groovy, movement-inducing music with a degree of syncopation is particularly conducive to sustaining flow (p. 181), a notion supported by empirical research into groove (Witek et al.

2014). Conversely, Zielke et al. (2023) identify technical anxiety, instability, and sudden disruptions as factors that inhibit flow, closely reflecting the conditions under which continuity weakened in my practice.

Ease versus improvisation

Following improvisatory intuitions often led me to stretch my technical abilities, which in turn risked disruptions in rhythmic flow and challenged the ideal conditions outlined above. Managing this tension became a key concern in my drumming practice. A recurring observation was that successful reconfigurations of the rhythmic flow tended to emerge from embodied familiarity rather than far-reaching cognitive planning. This is closely paralleled by Rose's (2017) proposal that "the not-predetermined form emerges by allowing the body to lead" (Rose, 2017, p. 142), together with Pauline Oliveros' notion that "the body knows what to do" (as cited in Rose, 2017, p. 131). Rose argues that improvisation draws on deeply practiced habits marked by high fluidity and adaptability in performance contexts, a view drawing from John Butcher's description of musical materials as malleable and fluid at the moment of creation (Butcher, cited in Rose, 2017, p. 156).

Alongside a number of practical considerations, such as the continuability of introduced ideas and the option of simply not changing, a fairly obvious conclusion to these tensions was to keep continually extending my optionality through ongoing personal practice with various rhythmic frameworks and their combinations. This aligns with Rose's (2017, p. 146) observation that improvising musicians devote extensive time to practice in order to sustain technical facility, not as an end in itself, but as a means of supporting the creative and collaborative demands of improvisation.

Group settings

As discussed in the findings, a practical approach was to work with familiar rhythmic material, as the collective context would inevitably recontextualise and resignify anything I played in unexpected ways. A notable finding in this context was the value of adopting a non-reactive stance in group improvisation. Rather than responding immediately to changes introduced by others, maintaining my playing as it was allowed the evolving sound space to recontextualise it organically. This reinforced the sense of music as an ongoing state rather than a sequence of exchanges. This did not entail an absence of interaction, but rather a different temporal logic to it. These considerations resonate with Rose's (2017, pp. 156–157)

emphasis on interaction as a central contributor to creativity in improvisation, while diverging in the slower pace adopted in this research.

An interesting parallel can be found in Rose's (2017) account of the Berlin *Echtzeitmusik* scene, which deemphasised spontaneity as a central ideal in free improvisation, distancing itself from earlier, more "hyperactive" forms through a reduction of material and an openness to diverse compositional strategies (p. 155). The slower pace of improvisation adopted in this research allowed time to observe what was happening. As the pressure to respond to change was reduced, the non-reactive stance also supported continued immersion in the music and a sustained flow state.

Space

During the project period (2024-2025), I held the notion of music as a space as a central but initially vague guiding value. This sense emerged from my personal practice of spending extended time playing unchanging, cyclical drum patterns, which generated an experience of an *ongoing state*, a sustained presence that took on spatial qualities in my mind. If one can meaningfully speak of "being inside" the music, it must then carry spatial qualities in some sense.

During the verbalisation phase of the research in autumn 2025, this intuition became more explicitly articulated through several conceptual frames. Within the Finnish folk-music concept of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic), Heikki Laitinen (2000) speaks of music as a space that one may enter and exit, a space in which the music "just is" (Laitinen, 2000). Relatable ideas can be found in minimalism, where an absence of clear directional logic likewise contributes to a perception of music as an ongoing state. In ambient music, an essential aspect of spatiality is the absence of foreground elements, resulting in a decentralised sound field (Talbot, 2019, pp. 75–76). It seems that the shared qualities of a reduced emphasis on past and future musical events and the presence of a decentralised sound field, in some form, shape the conception of music as a space.

Are the drums within the space, or constitutive of it?

Within the context of this research, a question arises as to whether drums exist within a musical space, or whether they constitute that space, or a part of it. A repeating drum pattern is not only a state of being but also a form of motion; its perception depends on anticipation

and prediction (Seeberg et al., 2024), and, when syncopation is present, its structure is essentially a recurring cycle of tension and release. Fink's (2005, pp. 43-46) concept of recombinant teleology offers one way of reconciling this motion with sense of musical stasis, as goal-directedness assumes a cyclical form in which the "goal" is simply the continuation of the pattern. Reading this through the lens of *jouissance*, as discussed by Fink (2005, pp. 37-39), does not seem far removed from this experience. This perspective also resonates with Zielke et al.'s (2023) account of the flow state within music, which emerges when musical expectations are fulfilled, with repeated sequences identified as a factor conducive to flow. The observation in the findings that a rhythm which *felt good* seemed to *call* for repetition aligns with these considerations.

In practice, an absence of a foreground – as in ambient music – was rarely the case with the drum set within the improvisational spaces during the project; quite the contrary, this was something the timbral and dynamic considerations discussed in the findings sought to address. However, it was central to my thinking that the recurrence of rhythmic material, once established, begins to confirm expectations rather than continually drawing attention to itself. Dies' (2013, p. 329) notion of repetition's *"de-noveling"* power, regardless of a gesture's initial novelty, supports the idea that even a foreground element such as the drum set may gradually recede in the listener's perception, becoming part of an ongoing state that no longer demands focused attention. As described in the findings, striving for a "spatial" form of playing that favoured continuity, repetition and a certain "uneventfulness" seemed to contribute to a sense of space.

Fast and slow

A foundational aspect of the research involved enveloping drum patterns within a slowly evolving surrounding sound space, at times with no direct or explicit relationship between the two layers other than the resulting sound field. Energetic patterns with a strong sense of forward motion embedded within slowly evolving sonic environments resulted in some particularly compelling improvisations during spring 2025.

This closely parallels Fink's (2005, p. 105) discussion of fast and slow temporal layers interlaced in minimalist music, where rapid rhythmic activity unfolds within harmonically static or slowly evolving structures, giving rise to various perceptual metaphors of motion in space. A particularly resonant example is Joan La Barbara's description of a Steve Reich

piece: "*Variations for Winds, Strings and Keyboards* is … in a constant state of motion while giving an overall feeling of peace and rest" (La Barbara, cited in Fink, 2005, p. 105). This coexistence of fast and slow temporal layers also resonates with the embodied approach that supported a sense of peace or stillness in rhythmic patterns, involving a pendulum-like head movement "dancing" underlying metric layers, as described in the findings.

Change

Within the concept of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic) continuous variation is an essential element in creating a sense of musical "endlessness." Within minimalism, slight differences within repetition are essential in drawing listeners into a focused and receptive state, according to Dies (2013, p. 333). As discussed earlier, the group context provided continuous variation through interacting loops of differing lengths and ongoing improvisation. This meant that not changing what I was playing remained a viable option for much of the time. In the findings section, I described my approaches to change, primarily in terms of variation and reconfiguration, alongside the use of recurring "themes" and occasional "comet-like" events, elements that also recurred, but on a longer timescale, perhaps at intervals of a minute.

Despite the open atmosphere, the importance of decisiveness in introducing material became apparent. This did not entail making changes overtly noticeable, but rather ensuring that changes were concise and clearly enacted, without extended preparation or afterthoughts enveloping the event. In my thinking, this meant that the listener's attention is not drawn into anticipating or interpreting what might happen next, but could remain oriented within the ongoing flow. Over time, such an approach could foster a "culture" of change, a shared sense of trust in how change functioned within the improvised space.

A similar logic can be found in minimalist compositional practices, as articulated in Robert Fink's (2005, p. 149) analytical model of plateaus and shifts. In this model, extended stretches of apparent stasis – where "nothing really happens" – are formed through incremental modulation of repetitive cycles, while occasional decisive harmonic or melodic events momentarily reintroduce a sense of direction, bringing the music into a new state. This can be read in relation to Fink's description of listening to minimalism as a process of fluctuating attention, in which listeners move in and out of attentive engagement with the music, momentarily "clicking in" during moments of release, with periods of aimless thought or temporal drift in between (p. 45).

To be in or outside the music, or somewhere in between?

During the research project, I developed a habit of being deeply immersed in the music as it was improvised in the group settings, entering a focused and attentive state, playing with my eyes closed and largely unresponsive to the outside world. Most of the time, my contact with my collaborators was mediated entirely through the sound being created. In my view, this immersion was supported by the non-presentational, "spatial" mode of playing, the non-reactive stance adopted to group improvisation, and the open listening that did not ask the music for anything specific.

These approaches closely reflect the inward, non-presentational mode of musicking as described by Laitinen (1990) and Ilmonen (2014), which Ilmonen recognises as an important aspect of playing music in accordance with long aesthetic (*pitkä estetiikka*) principles (p. 20). Laitinen's account describes a musicians' indifference to the outside world progressively deepening as the endlessly varied music unfolds (1990, p. 250-251). Both authors also refer to A.O. Väisänen's (1943, p. 43) description of *hiljainen haltioituminen,* a state of quiet absorption akin to being spellbound by the music. It should be noted that particularly Laitinen's and Väisänen's accounts relate largely to solo practices. Additionally, the central role of continuous variation within pitkä estetiikka links it closely to improvisational practises.

Bailey's (1993) interviews with improvising musicians highlight diverging views on audience presence across traditions; Ronnie Scott describes communication with an audience as central to jazz. Paco Peña suggests that large audiences can compromise the nature of flamenco, perhaps reflecting a similar emphasis. From a Hindustani music perspective, Viram Jasani reflects that the greatest creative freedom often emerges in practice situations, where a musician is not concerned with an audience and can "really let themselves go" (Bailey, 1993, p. 45). Within flow research, the flow state is identified as a crucial component of successful improvisation, as it enhances fluency and spontaneity in the creative process. Improvisation itself, together with the absence of performance anxiety, is also highlighted as conducive to entering flow (Biasutti & Habe, 2023). Loepthien and Leipold (2022) suggest that the absence of socio-evaluative pressure supports flow, particularly in the context of listening to music, an activity of an intimate, personal character. Taken together, these accounts suggest that, particularly in improvised music such as that examined in the present research, it is

essential for a musician to develop a functional approach to sharing a musical space with others without being negatively affected by external factors.

From a perspective of largely composed music, John Harle's (2013) account of performing minimalist music describes a mode of being "outside the music, looking in," in which the performer sustains emotional intensity while remaining aware of the music's effect on the audience. Emphasising the bond between performer and audience, he characterises an optimal experience as an intensely heightened, meditative state driven by an apparently external musical force, at times felt as a form of possession and closely aligned with the concept of flow. In a similar minimalist vein, Sarah Cahill views the presence of an audience as a potential challenge, emphasising the importance of not being "flustered by the sceptics checking their watches" (p. 386), given the nature of minimalist music. In her account, the spell of minimalism requires time and space to unfold, and the performer must "seduce" the audience through their own conviction (p. 387).

Rose (2017), writing from a context of free improvisation, advocates cultivating analytical sensitivity within musical awareness alongside developing an understanding of the effects of decision-making in group improvisational contexts. He highlights small ensemble settings as environments in which these effects can be perceived with particular clarity (p. 151). A strong parallel can be drawn to the trio practice explored in this research, where musical actions, gestures, and decisions indeed carried heightened significance, not only due to the small group size but also because of the scarcity of musical material, echoing Broad's (1993) description of minimalism, where a reduction of material heightens the perceptual significance of small shifts in the musical texture (p. 52).

If the music is fully improvised, and the musicians have essentially nothing to "present", no predetermined structures to attend to, no immediate changes to react to, and no visual signals are being used, it continues to make sense to me to be as fully immersed in the music itself as possible, akin to an inward, non-presentational mode of playing. One could argue that, in this way, the real-time decision-making steering the improvisation occurs from the most informed position available: a combined perspective of an immersed listener and an active caretaker of the musical space.

A central aspect of the research was to develop ways of being within these open, long-form improvised spaces. The approach that emerged combined a contemplative immersion with

attentiveness to the quality and nature of the music as it unfolded, supported by a number of practical approaches developed during the project. Developing an understanding of decision-making in these spaces was central; as stated in the findings, my agency lay in how I responded to change and continued to enact the music.

A rhythmic reflection

Finally, the weekly practice of engaging in slow group improvisation took on a quality akin to a ritual for me: one of stepping out of the urgency of everyday life, slowing down, and focusing on the present moment, what is there and then, or here and now. These improvisation spaces had no music to know and no preparatory work to complete. As described in the findings, the recurring nature of the group sessions made them an appealing context for reflecting on my "musician's life" during a passed week, through exploring rhythms and drawing on things that felt timely and relevant for me at the moment of each session.

Heikki Laitinen (1990) reflects on the modern condition in the article *Hiljaisuuden ääniä (Sounds of quietness)* and argues that a longing for quietness– not understood as silence, but as an absence of noise – persists in many of us, and that this state remains accessible through immersing ourselves in singing and playing music (pp. 247–256). One might argue that, in the 35 years since his writing, the surrounding noise has intensified significantly. The uneventful and undramatic mode of musicking explored in this research can be understood as a contribution, an invitation, and a reminder to slow down the pace and find meaning in less rather than more.

7 Conclusions

This artistic research explored how a sustained rhythmic continuity can be achieved on the drum set practically and conceptually, and how a drummer may conduct oneself to support such continuity within open-ended improvisational contexts. Through long-term embodied practice, group improvisation, and a reflective audiovisual analysis, the study developed practical, conceptual, and experiential insights into long-aesthetic drumming as a spatial and presence-oriented musical practice.

Summary of findings

In response to the first research question, the study highlights the importance of bodily, technical, and attentional ease. Rhythmic material that feels physically comfortable, motorically stable, and pleasurable to play supports an effortless state of being in rhythm. Deeply embodied ostinati functioned as anchors that enabled sustained flow and supported improvised variation. Dynamic control and timbral sensitivity contributed not only to the consistency of the rhythmic flow but also expanded creative freedom, particularly at lower dynamic levels. A key aspect in creating an uninterrupted and relatively effortless rhythmic flow involved managing the tension between an ideal of ease and the practical limits of one's technical ability when following creative intuitions within the improvisatory approach adopted in this research.

The second research question concerned how a drummer should conduct oneself to sustain rhythmic continuity in an open-ended improvisational context. Within group improvisation, the project entailed a reorientation of musical conduct toward a slower pace and a reduced density of musical information and events. This included defined approaches to introducing change, a non-reactive stance toward group interaction, and an open listening stance. Rather than responding immediately to perceived musical "calls," maintaining continuity and a slower pace of interaction allowed ongoing rhythmic material to be recontextualised by the evolving group texture. Introducing change knowingly, either as variation within an existing rhythmic cycle or as a committed reconfiguration into a new ongoing state, together with consideration for the continuability of all introduced ideas, provided a helpful framework for improvisation and reduced short-lived ideas. Conceptualising music as a present-oriented, ongoing space in which all musical actions contextualise one another, without a clear directional logic, supported focused and deep immersion in group improvisation. Ultimately,

as a recurring practice, the group sessions took on the nature of a ritual, offering a means of stepping out of the hurries of everyday life.

Contribution and further reflections

This research articulates drumming as a spatial, continuity-driven practice, drawing on minimalism, the Finnish concept of *pitkä estetiikka* (long aesthetic), and improvisation, and developed in close connection with elements of ambient music. It offers an account of how ongoing rhythmic flow, bodily ease, and mental orientation converge into a long-aesthetic mode of drumming, expanding existing discussions of percussion toward a slower, less eventful musical logic. The study demonstrates how the drum set, often associated with articulation, direction, and form, can function as an ongoing spatial element within collective, open-ended improvisation. It further outlines an approach to group improvisation that privileges present-oriented musical immersion in slowly evolving sound environments.

Several directions for further research emerge from this work. Rhythm was discussed primarily at a general level, without close differentiation between the specific qualitative properties of individual rhythmic structures as sustained flow. This abstraction diverges from the lived experience of drumming and could constitute a line of research focused more closely on how particular rhythmic grids, cycles, or metric organisations shape long-form continuity. For example, within African traditional musics, Willie Anku (2007) observes "some degree of correspondence between the 16 grid and recreational music, the 12 grid and ceremonial music, and the cross-grid and ritual or prowess music" (p. 8).

On a personal artistic level, the research left ample room to explore a long-aesthetic rhythmic flow at higher dynamic levels and greater intensities. One could experiment with longer rhythmic cycles and perhaps more "cognitive" approaches to forming rhythmic cycles in improvisation, as much of the playing during the research relied on thoroughly embodied patterns that required little cognitive effort. Additionally, as a recurring practice, each improvised session continues to generate insights into aspects of drumming that invite further development. The exact nature of the artistic outcome of this endeavour remains open, ranging from inviting peaceful stillness in the listener to sustaining more intense experiences through continually varied, high-energy drumming.

Slow improvisation as a group practice, understood as the collective creation of slowly evolving sound spaces, invites further exploration, following approaches such as those

discussed by Mayall (2021). Improvised continuous or recurring musical elements that circulate within a shared musical space in an unpredetermined manner can invite both musicians and listeners into a highly focused state, oriented toward a reduced amount of musical information and subtle details and shifts in the music. As an inclusive and open group practice, this line of musicking is also applicable to a variety of pedagogical contexts, which I had the opportunity to explore and present during the research period.

As described in the findings and discussion, engagement with long-aesthetic drumming and improvisation revealed a ritual-like dimension, offering a means of stepping out of accelerated musical and everyday temporalities into a slower, more attentive mode of being. Reflections and conversations surrounding the performances during the research period strengthened my sense that there is space – perhaps even a call – for such experiences in contemporary life. In a cultural environment shaped by productivity and constant stimulation, musical practices that invite settling, listening, and sustained presence offer an opportunity for slowing down in a meaningful way.

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Appendices

Template of the artistic research consent for use of personal data.

Consent for use of personal data

Artistic research participation

Project title:
Drumming spaces – Approaches to long-aesthetic drumming

Researcher:
Markus Snellman
Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki
markus.snellman@uniarts.fi

Consent to participate in the research

I have understood that participation in this artistic research project is **voluntary**, and that I may **withdraw my participation at any time** by notifying the researcher, without any negative consequences.

Please tick the applicable options:

☐ I wish to participate in the artistic research project as an **artist / performer / composer / collaborator**, and I consent to my **name being published** in connection with the research.

☐ I wish to participate in the artistic research project **anonymously**.

☐ I give permission, in accordance with **copyright law**, for my artistic work and/or performance to be **used as part of the research**.

☐ I give permission, in accordance with **copyright law**, for my artistic work and/or performance to be **presented publicly** (e.g. concerts, presentations, documentation, recordings).

☐ I wish to be **identified as the author** of my artistic work/performance.

☐ I wish my artistic work/performance to be **published without my name**.

I confirm that I have received sufficient information about the research project.
I have understood the information provided and I voluntarily agree to participate.

_____
Signature of research participant

_____
Printed name

_____
Email address

Date: _____