

*Grounds for Violin and Electronics* was composed in 2018 at the request of my friend and colleague Elizabeth Chang for a concert she was to present in Singapore--the concert ended up being cancelled, hence this performance is the premiere. Professor Chang asked me to compose a work that could be partnered with and was related to the Bach Chaconne from the D Minor Partita. She further stipulated that the work should incorporate the use of electronics. I have loved the music of Bach for my entire musical life and have long been interested in and have been composing works that include electronic components, nonetheless, the task of composing such a work was daunting.

Eventually, I decided to make use of both “fixed electronics”—that is, synthesizer-derived material which is pre-recorded and is immutable in performance—and “live electronics,” where specific sections of the actual real-time performance are recorded and then played back at later but also specific times. This invests the work with a mutability and spontaneity not possible with purely fixed electronics and forces the performer to confront the performance with a different sense of listening as one reacts musically and emotionally with his or her own playing. Everything is precisely notated, including the fixed electronics, but the spontaneity of the performance—the idea of responding at the moment to what you have just played—gives to the work an extra level of expressiveness and humanness.

As the title suggests, my response to this challenge of composing a piece to be played after the great Chaconne was to create a piece based on a ground bass figure, which would loosely correspond to the bass line in Bach’s Chaconne. Both chaconnes and ground bass pieces are based on a simple variation principle, where the initial bass figure is used to generate all subsequent material, both harmonic and linear. Therefore, the easiest way to follow my work on first hearing is to keep in mind the original descending bass figure—which is related to Bach’s in rhythm, contour, and pitch—as the piece unfolds. This should be relatively easy to do, at least at the beginning of the work, because the figure regularly reoccurs at predictable and recognizable measurements. Later in the work, those lengths become longer and a bit more difficult to recognize. Formally, the piece is in three sections. The initial set of variations clearly sets out the ground, which is followed by a second, faster section where, though still present, the ground is harder to detect. A somewhat abrupt break leads to a varied return of the opening material. This is then followed by coda. It is perhaps in the last notes of the coda where the spiritual and emotional center of the work can be most clearly heard.

The performance you are about to hear, which was recently recorded by Elizabeth Chang and Jazer Gilles is very compelling and expressive and, to my ear at least, captures the essence of my composition.