

# depending on what the meaning of is is

“[N]arrative never disappeared—it just went to the movies, and stayed, and stayed. But what had caused stories to be exiled from high art? The idea of essence, and the equation of essence with goodness. Can you imagine? Visual art is essentially composed of form, color, materials. Anything to do with content is extraneous and therefore to be associated with badness; therefore to be eliminated. Moreover, content, says this line of thought, is controlling. This means that a rose is the Virgin Mary (depending on what the meaning of “is” is). And art, like society, must be liberated from such hierarchically imposed values. What this argument overlooked, of course, is that narrative is a form in itself, not just a vehicle for content.”

—Herbert Muschamp, “Fashion Stills” (*The New York Times*, September 12, 2004)

“It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is. If the—if he—if ‘is’ means is and never has been, that is not—that is one thing. If it means there is none, that was a completely true statement.”

—United States President Bill Clinton in his August 17, 1998 deposition to the Grand Jury (according to footnote 1,128 in the investigative report of Kenneth Starr, published September 11, 1998)

In 2002, I composed a short solo harpsichord piece for Rebecca Pechefsky to perform as part of her Carnegie Hall debut. Since the centerpiece of the program on which it was scheduled was J.S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, I fashioned a piece that played on the notion of five in every way I could think of—five different pentatonic scales, quintuple meter, five minute duration—and I cheekily called it *is 5*. A few years later I began to wonder how much of the essence of that piece was wrapped up in all those fives. I wondered what would happen if I took the same material and fashioned a piece using seven possible seven-note scales and seven beats per measure. The result, *is 7*, became an independent composition. But I still wondered if the same idea could be taken one further step, to an almost but not completely chromatic sound world using eleven different collections of eleven pitches which would have a correspondingly perplexing eleven beat rhythm: *is 11*. Though each of these three pieces can be played separately, playing them together as *depending on what the meaning of is is* makes for a strangely iterative suite. Each movement progresses almost identically, but the different melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic possibilities result in noticeably different sonic environments.

## Pentatonic Scales for *is 5*:

1. E (4) G# (1) A (2) B (4) D# (1) (E)
2. C (3) E (1) F (2) G (3) Bb (2) (C)
3. A (2) B (2) C# (3) E (3) G (2) (A)
4. B (3) D (2) E (2) F# (3) A (2) (B)
5. F (4) A (2) B (1) C (4) E (1) (F)

## Heptatonic Scales for *is 7*:

- |                                     |   |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |
|-------------------------------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| 1. E Ionian (major):                | E | F# | G# | A  | B  | C# | D# | (E) |
| 2. C Mixolydian:                    | C | D  | E  | F  | G  | A  | Bb | (C) |
| 3. C Mixolydian with flatted 2nd:   | C | Db | E  | F  | G  | A  | Bb | (C) |
| 4. C Mixolydian with augmented 5th: | C | D  | E  | F  | G  | A  | Bb | (C) |
| 5. F Lydian                         | F | G  | A  | B  | C  | D  | E  | (F) |
| 6. B Aeolian (natural minor)        | B | C# | D  | E  | F# | G  | A  | (B) |
| 7. A Lydian with flatted 7th:       | A | B  | C# | D# | E  | F# | G  | (A) |

## Pitch collections for *is 11*:

- |     |   |   |    |   |    |   |    |   |   |    |    |
|-----|---|---|----|---|----|---|----|---|---|----|----|
| 1.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | D  | D# |
| 2.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 3.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 4.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 5.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D# |
| 6.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 7.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 8.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 9.  | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 10. | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |
| 11. | E | F | F# | G | G# | A | A# | B | C | C# | D  |