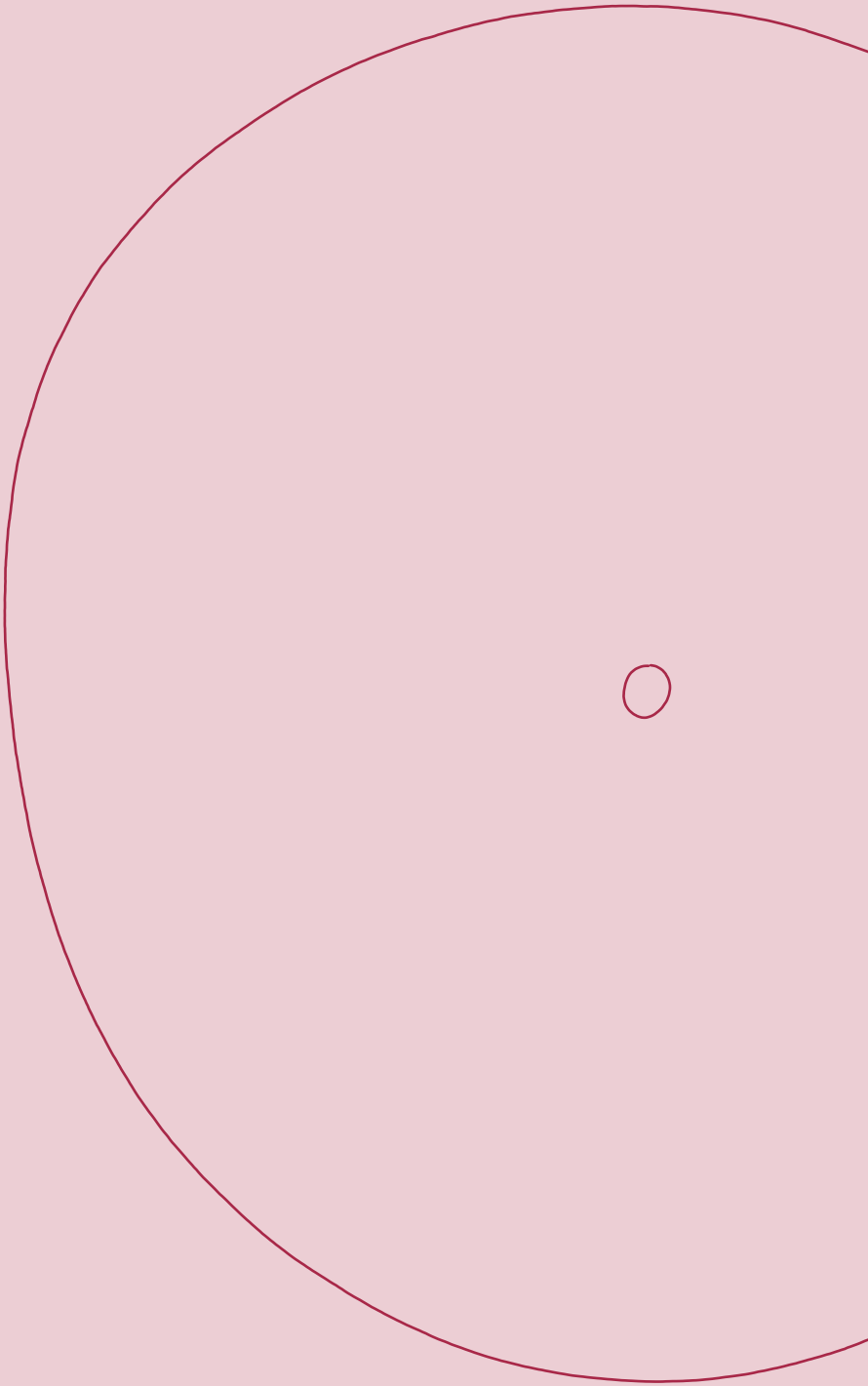


Six Turntables at Guelph Jazz Festival, 2025. Photographer: Weldon Hovey. Performer pictured: Jordan Lloyd.



There’s No Such Thing As Solo

Aki Onda interviews Christopher Willes and Akash Bansal about the project Six Turntables

AKI ONDA *How did Six Turntables come about? Christopher, what led you to conceive the project? And Akash, how did the collaboration start? And how would you describe your role in the project?*

CHRISTOPHER WILLES The project started in 2017, when I was an artist-in-residence at the Toronto Public Library (TPL). Every year, artists get paired with different branches of the wider library system and create experiences for the general public. I got interested in working with materials from the TPL’s vinyl record collection. It’s this sprawling collection that includes many private-press oddities related to Toronto, spanning decades.

For my residency, I was organizing workshops and experimental music concerts for kids and seniors in Scarborough. We did sound walks, Deep Listening workshops, and an electronic music series I called Quiet Concerts (headphone-based concerts in the stacks). I also spent about two months doing an after-school research project with a group of six teenagers, listening to obscure records from the collection. At the end of that process, we did a performance where we collaged them all together. After that, I reached out to Akash and asked them to work with me on clarifying the workshop and seeing what shape it could take if we did it again.

AKASH BANSAL Yeah—looking back, the way I got involved feels sort of happenstance and was slowly drawn out over a few years. I had actually been a fan of Public Recordings, a performing arts organization that Christopher was part of years before we ever met. Then in 2017, a mutual friend of ours, Thom Gill, asked me to DJ a Public Recordings season launch party with him. So Christopher and I really became friends after that. I ended up attending a bunch of the events Christopher organized during his first TPL residency, and he got to know my interest in archival material, plus the work I was doing in radio.

Christopher invited me as a consultant on a subsequent research residency in 2019, where we did a deep dive looking at the TPL record collection, and again in 2021 as a dramaturge when he began to revisit the workshop. As we developed the format, my role continued to shift. I now work alongside Christopher as a co-facilitator and co-creator on the project. He continues to handle the producing side of things.

Gradually, through a few different iterations in Toronto, we landed on this idea to create custom records for each iteration of the project. These records contain fragments of sounds we sample from the archives connected to the place where the project is presented. In that way, each iteration of the project reflects on a different sonic history, while the structure of the workshops themselves remains largely the same.

AKI *What drew you to this particular format of working with archival material?*

CHRISTOPHER Like Akash said, each time we do it, we work with sound recordings connected to that place. I like to think of it as engaging with a form of collective memory, not as data or something that belongs to the institution, but as something that can only really be encountered through listening, through conversation, through time and lived experience. Maybe somehow this project imagines archives as both memorial and still living: material that can create new experiences, new gatherings.

Before this project started, I was also doing a lot of work that dealt with these ideas. One was with the cassette tape collection at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (presently called The

ArQuives), an incredible, largely undocumented (at the time) community sourced collection of mixtapes, interviews, and audio porn going back decades. We did a 24-hour live radio broadcast of the tapes and asked the public to collectively document it in an exhibition. I was also part of a dance company at the time called Dancemakers, led by choreographer Michael Trent, that was working with its own history through its repertoire, and the question of how dances get transmitted between bodies. And then, with choreographer Ame Henderson and Public Recordings, I was part of another project that looked at the history of performances at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. So, I was really interested in performance in relation to archives of different kinds, and the library's record collection felt like a place to explore that more.

AKASH One of the early challenges we faced with the TPL's record collection was our limited access to the material. Even when we were able to work with the collection, there was a preciousness in how we were supposed to engage with the records as objects. So in 2022, Christopher fabricated a bunch of flexi disc records with audio samples we gathered from the collection, which really opened up the exploration process by making a kind of phantom collection of recordings drawn from fragments of the archive. We could play with the material more physically, and even write or draw on the discs—annotating them with performance notes.

Eventually we started making lathe-cut records. This allowed even more customization of how the sounds are placed on the surface of the discs, and therefore how someone works with these discs in our workshop. As a byproduct of the engineers we have worked with (Jackson Darby and Tyler Bisson) also being artists and really understanding what we're trying to accomplish, we've been able to push our own listening through a collaborative process with them. For example, we asked Tyler to listen to a drum solo, and drop the needle 50 times to cut 50 random loops into the discs. In this way, each disc is slightly different—a kaleidoscope of all these processes of listening, cut into objects that we then explore with the workshop participants.

AKI *I wanted to ask: what does working with turntables make possible that a more conventional musical instrument cannot? Your approach connects conceptually and methodologically to musique concrète, and to later turntable practices by artists such as Christian Marclay, Otomo Yoshihide, and Philip Jeck.*

AKASH The turntable creates common ground between us and the participants. Even if a participant has never seen a record, held a record, or touched a turntable, they can tap into this understanding of how this instrument works and pretty quickly situate themselves. It's not like a piano or a flute, where you need a certain education. There's something egalitarian about a turntable. You can hit start, hit stop, put your finger on the disc, lift the needle and drag it across the record's surface. There's technique involved, but you don't have to be an expert to make a technical decision. It's restricted, but open.

CHRISTOPHER Yes, we don't work with them in a virtuosic way, and yet we don't think of it as a turntablism-style project either. (That said, we of course love the various histories of the creative use of turntables—Maria Chavez and Marina Rosenfeld are two others that come to mind—and have been influenced by all these wonderful artists). It sounds sort of boring, but somehow I feel like the way we work with the turntables is more akin to how you listen to a record at home—more quotidian. We use battery-operated turntables with little speakers inside, sometimes plugged into guitar amps, and we pass them between us. We also all work with all the turntables together (nobody is soloing per se). So the turntables become a shared instrument, or sound sculpture, maybe, that we're collectively shaping.

AKI *Let's talk about participants and collective practice. You have often recruited participants through an open call. What kind of participants are you hoping to attract? What do you hope they will take away from the experience or project? More than collective listening, are you also interested in teaching participants how to negotiate, make decisions, and work together as a group?*

CHRISTOPHER We often stage the project at a festival or contemporary art context in collaboration with a school, and that's where the participants are drawn from. And yes, the workshop is intended as a gathering where participants can experience a particular kind of collaborative process. The workshops propose score-based ways of engaging with the audio recordings as a group: listening to them in different ways, spatially, and mixing and collaging them through a collectively negotiated method. Through that experience, I feel like a certain group attention and sensitivity develops that becomes the subject of the workshop.

Many of the scores utilize the form of a relay. Individuals take turns doing actions, and it's the accumulation of, and responses to those actions that generate the thing. This way of working asks that everyone commit to making small decisions, and to stay with the decisions of others—not predetermining what it should sound like or become. I think that's challenging for some people, but I think it's a really meaningful way to work. It's about trying to work through structures that are group-oriented, and the scores we bring try to work on that in various ways.

AKASH In so many ways, this idea of archive, of music or sound-making, is on the surface of the project. It's really about listening to one another, and challenging yourself to develop an awareness of when or why you're making a decision. Perhaps it's even about friendship and healing. And so, people really don't have to define themselves as musicians to participate. They don't need musical training, since it's about practicing ways of listening more than musical skills.

CHRISTOPHER We also always give participants an honorarium, since we're asking the participants to become performers: interpreters of the scores and exercises we propose. We want to acknowledge how much we are asking of them, in terms of energy and presence, but also time commitment: it's about a week of workshops and rehearsal.

AKASH I will also add the caveat that we don't always work with non-musicians and that the participants of each iteration can be really defined by the organization that supports our outreach efforts. Recently, when we worked with high school students in Guelph, for example, our access point was the choir director, who is one of those teachers who changes people's lives. Anyways, all of the participants came from her choir, and after our workshop ended, we found out that they were a really active contemporary youth choir that has toured internationally. Like, they went on-stage to back Alice Cooper for "School's Out," in front of 25,000 people in Toronto two weeks after our presentation there. They had a different relationship to performing than anyone else we've worked with.

AKI *How do you guide participants through such a process and into the performance?*

CHRISTOPHER The process is quite structured. Each day of the workshop begins with a long warm-up. These warm-ups are guided, somatic experiences that get us moving around the room and listening in a very wide sense. They're exercises meant to cultivate a certain physical presence and awareness of each other and the space that's hopefully useful in the work we're doing more generally. Then we spend time listening to the records, and playing with them, following instruction-based scores that set

up different experiments to layer, braid, and mix the audio recordings together, using six turntables and guitar amplifiers.

The audio on each disc is organized for use with corresponding scores. For example, in one score, we physically pass the turntables around in a circle and we try not to let the needle skip. The instruction is to slowly pass the objects in a circle, continuously adjusting the volume so that they sound equally loud, and gradually progressing through different tracks on the disc. There are other scores that are more open-ended too, which have really undetermined outcomes. We give the instructions and then we see how the group interprets them.

AKASH If there's something didactic about the work, it's in its repetition. We really try to commit to repeating scores again and again with participants. It's through this repetition or rehearsal that the limits and possibilities of each score become clear.

AKI *I saw the video documentation of the 2024 Toronto Biennial iteration. There was a moment when participants passed around objects, such as a lamp or a triangle or a bell. It seemed to be a section of the score. What was happening at that moment? Was it intended as a kind of ritual? And what do those objects and gestures mean?*

CHRISTOPHER That's a kind of warm-up we do. It's a score I call "Holding Silence." It's adapted from a Montessori education game that involves passing bells or other objects with sonic potential, in a circle, but in silence. The group is going to make sound, but it's also going to make space for silence, and that is also part of composing together. It's deceptively simple, but it feels very ritualistic. It's also very intimate to sit in a group and be quiet. A lot of the activities we do are in a circle, like the score I described where we pass the turntables. The circle evokes the object of the record to me, the way it turns, and the passing of time.

AKI *Have you been using the same scores for each workshop, or can they be different?*

CHRISTOPHER I feel like it's important to say that we think of this project as iterative. There's a way we work on it, certain scores we do, and a structure for how we invite participants to play and explore. But the recordings are different every time, and so is the context. So we're always balancing those two things, figuring out how the project has to shift in response each time. There's a set of things that we always do. But they're open-ended propositions, and each group's interpretation shows us new sides of them.

One time, at the Toronto Biennial, a smaller group of students formed a subgroup during the performance and suddenly started doing a different score than the rest of the group. I'm fairly certain they had decided to do this in advance. There's a kind of implicit politics to the scores; they're non-hierarchical in a way, proposing leaderless ways of mixing these sounds together. And so suddenly there was a different power dynamic—a clique was formed. The performance kind of broke for a second, then gradually it came back together. It was interesting to see the score being exceeded like that, and the eventual way back together. I was kind of amazed, actually.

AKASH Yeah, on one hand there is a certain way that they failed the work in their rebellion. They broke the scores and made the work noisy and loud. And on the other hand, they really received what we'd been trying to convey about the agency they had in making the thing, y'know, the thing that it is. It was brilliant: they made a choice, and everyone was aware of that.

AKI *That's really great. The score is not just instruction. It kind of gives them freedom to interpret.*

CHRISTOPHER Yeah, I think they took what we were saying really seriously: if this is about cultivating a shared attention as a group,



Six Turntables at Guelph Jazz Festival, presented in partnership with Guelph Collegiate Vocational Institute, 2025. Photographer: Weldon Hovey.
Performers pictured: Quinn Logue-Barei, Gaven Gulewitsch-Cleminson, Kali Gonsalves, Jupjeet Daroch, Rowan Dixon-McCoy, Gev Rimon, Jordan Lloyd, Maya Moreau, Max Friedberg, Julia Blakeney, Ariane Lachapelle-Poulin, and Sophie Lin.

then maybe we have a particular take on that, that the score is not meeting.

When we worked at the high school in Guelph (GCVI), it was students from different grades, selected by their music teacher (Lane Osborne). So the group wasn't necessarily an established group of friends. But then, suddenly they found themselves in a process where some of the cliques and ordinary power dynamics of being in school were not applicable. That also created a really interesting space to work together.

AKI *That sounds really interesting. I'm wondering actually if you discuss those topics with participants during the performance or the workshop?*

CHRISTOPHER With each score, we give the tasks, but we also talk about the values behind them. I think that, more than the tasks themselves, is what gets people engaged.

For example, rather than noticing what is being done, we might ask people to notice what others aren't doing, which runs contrary to our ordinary attention. With that, participation often really shifts. People seem to be thinking, "Oh, that person hasn't done X task in a long time. Maybe I'll wait until they do that before I do it again." The work can become really spacious with that kind of attention. Something opens up. The quality of time changes, and the way we're listening changes.

AKASH I think that there are also ways the scores we do try to uphold a non-hierarchical process that deeply impact outcomes of the workshop. I've consistently observed this level of vulnerability that each cohort of participants has had with us, this way that they invite us into a sort of circle of trust. It's happened that individuals have shared something about their experience that's pretty private or something difficult that's going on in their life that they're sitting with when they're in that room. That vulnerability feels tied up with a feeling of agency, safety and empowerment. Maybe it is an outcome of the work, or the facilitation or the simple invitation to listen. There's a lot swirling in the room during the workshops.

CHRISTOPHER And part of that, I think, is that there's collaborative dialogue, but there's also another kind of exchange happening in the space. For example, there's a part in the workshop where participants are invited one at a time to share what they're noticing, but it's very specifically not an open conversation—it's simply a time to listen to each other. Obviously these are forms that have existed before, but I think it's pretty rare that you're offered to be in a space like that and so I feel like what you're talking about, Akash, is that people get kind of opened up by it… especially in a school context. There's a place for critical dialogue and debate, and that's important, but this isn't that.

AKI *I mean you're kind of expanding the notion of deep listening. You know, listening to others, listening to the collective, listening to the environment.*

CHRISTOPHER I've always really loved Pauline Oliveros' work, and I was lucky to meet her a few times before she passed. Recently I made a book and record with her partner, IONE, *Resonance Gathering*, about her work. While I was researching that project, I stumbled on a method of group facilitation called Deep Democracy. I was fascinated, because I'm studying conflict mediation myself, and I wondered whether it had something to do with Pauline's work. So I wrote to IONE, and she was like, "Oh yeah, the founders of Deep Democracy used to come to our retreats, and then worked on some of those ideas into the international relations space." I was amazed at how wide-reaching her work has been.

AKI *I love that it's not just about a musical context, it's a social context as well.*

What sort of role do you expect from the audience? Are they witnesses to the participants' workshop and performance? What do you hope their presence changes about what happens in the room?

CHRISTOPHER Hopefully it's interesting to simply witness the process. I love going to rehearsals and open studio events, and I just think that there's inherent value in trying to see a process—it's actually quite difficult to see something in an emergent state sometimes. And so I hope that people become curious about what process it is that we're in and that they can understand that we're still in that process. We're making decisions right now.

At the Guelph Jazz Festival, it felt essential to have the audience there, because you can hear the audience in the recordings, which is true of some of the recordings at Western Front. Some people even said to us, "I was at that concert you sampled." There was this feeling of revisiting ghosts, of ourselves even. Listening to a recording can allow you to revisit a moment in time, but also somehow revisit yourself. Each time you listen to it, the recording hasn't changed, but you have.

AKASH At the Guelph Jazz Festival, we talked a lot about playing the festival back to itself. That idea is really germinating what we're doing at Western Front, which is about that main performance hall, the Grand Luxe. We created a parameter for ourselves: the recordings had to have taken place inside the space where we'll be performing. And that feels really juicy.

CHRISTOPHER Yes, there's one recording of Joan La Barbara, a solo voice concert in the Grand Luxel. She does a warm-up, an arrival piece, called "space checking." It involves her making short vocal sounds that activate the acoustics of the room. You can literally hear the room in her voice. And it's the same room we'll be in.

AKI *Interesting, because during the process or during the performance, participants physically play, manipulate, and remix those recorded sounds. How does it change the original sounds? Do you also think something of the original sounds remains, even after they become something completely different?*

CHRISTOPHER I think one way the process changes the sounds is by placing them in relation to each other. For the last few iterations, we've worked with recordings of solo performances, fragments that are clearly individual instruments, out of an interest in how they braid together into some kind of ghost ensemble. It's about placing one thing next to another and seeing how they vibrate.

AKASH The earliest iterations used recordings by improv groups from the 70s, many connected to the Music Gallery (in Toronto). At that time, we were really interested in working with material that had a collective idealism at its core. Those recordings are often maximal and cacophonous. Now we've sort of inverted that logic and gone to solos. The recordings are like these little ephemeral islands across a long history, pulled together into something filled with dissonant histories and dissonant textures.

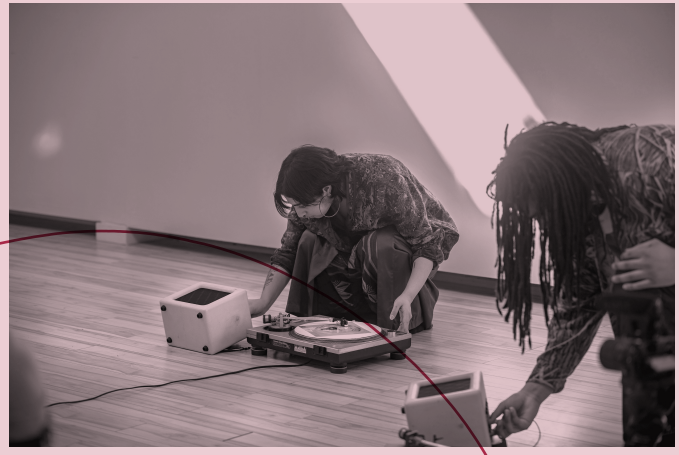
CHRISTOPHER In a way, we're still working within a collective idealism, though. The way we work with these individual sounds denies the idea of a solo. At least, that was an idea we came to when focusing on recordings of solo improvised concerts at the Guelph Jazz Festival. As an improviser, every time you perform, you unearth all the influences and teachers and experiences you've had. There's an implicit social community in each improvising musician's sound. Maybe there's no such thing as solo.



Six Turntables in rehearsal at Toronto Biennial of Art, 2025. Performers: Gail Angella Ledesma, Ximena Garcia Soto, Grace McHugh, Aileen Kim, Yihang Xu, Julianna Angheloni, Nikki Gilani, Ky Gray, Aliyah Aziz, Jada Flemming, Akash Bansal and Eejin Choi. Photo: Christopher Willes.



Creation residency for Six Turntables at Scarborough Civic Centre Library, 2017. Participant pictured: Maria Patricia Abuel.



Six Turntables in rehearsal at the Music Gallery, 2023. Pictured: Ximuna Diego and Aliyah Aziz.



Akash Bansal researching in the vinyl record collection at the Toronto Public Library, 2019. Photo: Christopher Willes.



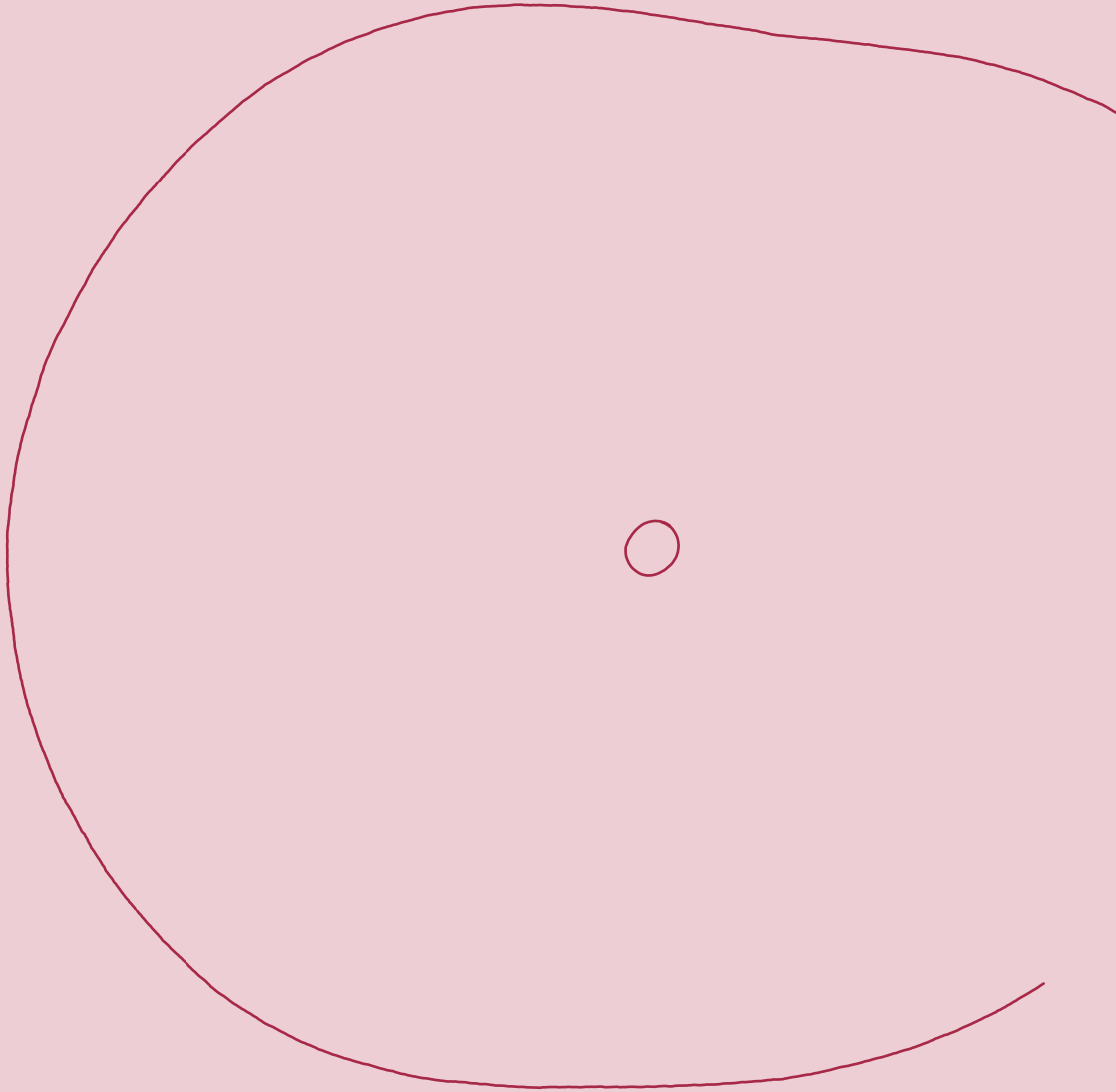
Six Turntables in rehearsal at the Music Gallery, 2023. Pictured: Christopher Willes and Ximuna Diego.



Christopher Willes researching at the Canadian Music Centre archives, Toronto, 2024. Photo: Akash Bansal.



Akash Bansal researching at the Toronto Public Library, holding a record called “SMELLS?” 2019. Photo: Christopher Willes.



Excerpts from a conversation between Aki Onda, Christopher Willes and Akash Bansal, recorded August 25 2026. Print design: Christopher Willes.

Six Turntables at Western Front, November 21 2026.

