

A Phenomenology of Collaboration in Contemporary Composition and Performance

This paper is an introduction to some of my recent research activities, which relate to composers and performers of contemporary music working collaboratively. I will start by giving an outline of my research and then I will discuss briefly some of the initial findings from this research.

Research Activities

Over the past two years I have been researching the area of collaboration in contemporary music, and more specifically how composers and performers work together. This study was prompted by my own experiences over many years of playing contemporary music, providing me with the opportunity to observe both composers and performers working creatively together in a practical setting. I considered this an interesting area to explore as I have found from experience the relations between both sets of musicians can be fraught with misunderstanding. As a performing musician, I wanted to maintain a practical focus in my research, so in an effort to better understand collaboration in composition and performance I devised an investigation best suited to my practical environment where the complementary areas of performance, education and research could best co-exist.

In this regard I commissioned five prominent Irish composers to write pieces for me as a bass clarinetist to perform. These composers – Ed Bennett, Rob Canning, Stephen Gardiner, Ronan Guilfoyle and Jane O'Leary, are amongst Ireland's most revered musicians, three of whom are members of Aosdana, the body established by the Irish Government to honour and support creative artists in Ireland. From the beginning I made it clear to the commissioned composers that I wanted to look carefully at their mode of compositional process and also to examine closely the way we worked together as musicians. I agreed with the composers to meet a minimum of 3 times: at the beginning (before the composition began), in the middle (during the compositional phase) and at the end when the compositions were completed. Each meeting was recorded and transcribed; I also kept a reflective journal of meetings dealing with any issues that I thought were relevant to the research. I asked the composers to keep sketches of their compositions and also to keep notes of any particular thoughts they had in relation to their compositional process. Between meetings I encouraged the composers to contact me if they felt it would be helpful. By the end of the second set of meetings I had a series of draft versions of the final pieces, which I then began to practice.

The meetings had broadly speaking two main components: firstly there was a formal interview of set questions and secondly a more informal playing, discussing, practical aspect, where ideas were discussed and tried out. For each of the meetings I devised a specific set of questions to ask each composer, dealing with a variety of areas including sketching, notation, experience of collaboration etc. (see Appendix A).

My own practice of the new pieces was also carefully documented, with the details of each practice session recorded in text form relating to: what specific method of practice was chosen, the mode of practice and why various artistic decisions were made. The reason to document the whole process so thoroughly was so that I could best understand the nature of collaboration as it applied to this particular research. It also afforded me the opportunity to get a better understanding of the creative processes involved in composing and performing. This practical phase of the research took place during the first six months of 2005 with the new pieces receiving their first performances in July 2005. The accumulated information and experiences are to be examined in detail in future papers with the following comments in this paper relating to a broad overview of some of the initial findings that include the following areas:

- Creative processes in performance and composition;
- Divisions within contemporary music;
- Composition and performance as integrated elements;
- Re-imagining contemporary music;
- Music in composition, performance and reception as inherently improvisatory.

Creative Processes in Performance and Composition

There is as much variety in the processes of composition as there are composers, as described by McCutchan in her book on composers' creative process 'the art of music composition ... illustrates in personal terms the notion that each composer's method of writing music is as individual as his or her fingerprint' (McCutchan, 1999: ix). The five composers I worked with as part of this research demonstrate this diversity, each composer approaching the development of new musical material in a unique and individual way. As an example I will briefly refer to two of these approaches: the first is from a composer who is essentially a jazz musician – Ronan Guilfoyle. He explained to me that he usually begins the process of composition with a basic idea for a melodic or rhythmic motif that he initially hears in his inner ear; once this becomes clear he plays this idea into the computer using a keyboard. From this initial idea the rest of the composition unfolds in a linear fashion with each new section added on to the previously composed material and then played directly into the computer. With each successive iteration he reviews previous material through audio playback and continues on from that point. Very little by way of editing takes place once the music has been played into the computer. The final phase of composition involves listening back to the completed work and adding further elements of phrasing and nuance. As the composer related to me in an interview ... I have played every single note of every composition I have ever written (Roe, 2005a).

In contrast the second example is of the composer Jane O'Leary who studied composition in America but has spent most of her life in Ireland. Her compositional process involves the repeated writing and rewriting of ideas until a musical shape develops. The musical material is constantly redrawn from within itself – as the composer herself commented, 'I just keep rewriting what I've got and it gets more elaborate and complex and more filled out' (Roe, 2005). In her view a sign of a good days work is when the wastepaper basket is full of discarded manuscript paper!

As with composition, so too performance, the process of realising and animating musical material involves a similarly diverse set of processes described by Nonken thus 'preparing musical works for performance invokes processes of learning and shed light on issues ranging from basic approaches to information processing (top-down versus bottom-up approaches, schema-driven learning strategies, and the mediating role of pre-acquired domain specific knowledge)' (Nonken, 2002: 1). The approach taken in realising these new works necessitated a variety of creative approaches, which was informed by the collaborative nature of the project. In the case of the work composed by the first composer Ronan Guilfoyle, the approach to working on this piece required developing rhythmic security and constancy throughout, with a clear jazz inflection right through the piece. This involved the grooving of patterns and the repetition of individual sections, eventually linking the three movements of the complete work together. A clear understanding and feel for jazz idioms being a prerequisite to appropriate realisation.

In contrast the working out of the musical material created by Jane O'Leary required an emphasis on texture, tonal spectrum and dynamic shading with rhythm and melody of secondary interest. The shaping of phrases, the amount of air to use for given tone colours, the degree of accent, the level of dynamic gradation all became primary considerations in preparing this work. The corresponding practical and creative applications of technique and imagination are in many ways similar to the act of composition itself where creative choices are key to realisation. The notational schemes in both of these works (as with most contemporary music) give a very incomplete indication of the real world of sound, as Barenboim has suggested in relation to notation when referring to Beethoven's fifth symphony, nobody is going to convince me that these black spots on white paper are the fifth symphony ... it comes into being only when an orchestra decides to play it, the peculiarity of music resides in the fact that there's this phenomenon of sound, music expresses itself only through sound (Barenboim, 2003: 111).

With both of these pieces the collaborative engagement between performer and composer assisted in compositional and performance processes resulting in a unified view of these new works.

Divisions Within Contemporary Music

The position of the composer or artist as being separate from society has historical antecedents, and resonances of this notion are still to be found in contemporary music composition. To

paraphrase the composer Ronan Guilfoyle, ... this attitude of some composers that they write in splendid isolation still exists ... that this (music) is passed down, and I use the phrase passed down deliberately, to the performer to do his best with it, and then for the performer to present this to the public, of whom he (the composer) has very little interest – the performer provides a sort of “cordon sanitaire” between the composer and audience (Roe, 2005b).

Whilst these sentiments expressed can seem a little extreme, they do however represent a common perception amongst musicians. It can often appear that some composers consider the “musical work” as pre-eminent with the ensuing performance and reception of same as being of only secondary consideration. On the other hand the view of some performers in relation to contemporary composition can be dismissive and lacking in engagement, especially those performers who primarily play the traditional classical repertoire. As a result of these prevailing attitudes the communication of new music can end up undergoing a series of expressive barriers before an audience gets to hear the new work.

Composition and Performance as integrated elements

The separation of performance and composition reflects the nature of contemporary society where individual specialisations are seen as a more efficient way to productive work. This separation of roles works against the essentially social and collaborative nature of music and “*musicking*” described by Small as a ritual in social space. In particular the distance between composer and performer in contemporary music can often be significant, with little communication on either side, that can result in misunderstanding and poor realisation of new work. In an effort to counteract this situation, performers and composers could usefully develop a more collaborative mindset, where it is acknowledged that both are engaged in effectively the same work: the creation of innovative music.

In furthering this suggestion, it is acknowledged that performers who play contemporary music take a different approach to performance when compared to the more traditional classical performer. This approach places creative engagement with new techniques and ideas as central, with performance being primarily about creative animation as opposed to the more prescribed interpretive approach of the mainstream performer. Given this mutual aspiration of contemporary composers and performers, a more effective way of conceiving and developing new music would be to conceptually and practically realign composition and performance where both activities are seen in equal relation. The creative relationships and processes developed being circular as opposed to hierarchical. These relationships can flourish in contemporary music ensembles, provided the approach taken is egalitarian where the motivating factor is the development of innovative work and not the promotion of individuals.

Re-imagining Contemporary Music

A conceptual and practical redrawing of the lines between composer, performer and audience would help develop a more integrated view and reception of contemporary music. The promotion of a collective mentality where all parties feel they are an important component in the making of the music, be it composing, performing or listening would strengthen the whole area of contemporary music making. In certain ways jazz represents a good model, where often the audience is seen to be as important and knowledgeable as the composers and performers themselves. There seems to be an inherent recognition by all involved, that the music itself is pre-eminent and galvanising, representing mutual respect and communal interest.

Both structural and attitudinal changes are required if a wider community of interest is to be developed for new music, where collaboration and communication represent a way forward. To effect these changes organisations that support contemporary music need to promote the music in a broad perspective with strategic initiatives to engage a wider audience of interest. The current top-down situation is inherently divisive where newly composed music is seen as pre-eminent with performance often considered as ancillary and audience reception as almost incidental. A new vision where audiences, performers and composers are placed on an equal footing would encourage greater involvement for all.

Music as inherently improvisatory

To achieve a more balanced approach to contemporary music making necessitates; removing the glare of attention from newly composed pieces and world premieres, to promoting the whole process of contemporary music making and reception as pre-eminent. This can only happen if all involved are considered equal, which is often not the case in contemporary music, where the composer is seen as paramount with the performer and audience given secondary consideration. We need to consider and promote an attitude that all people engaged by contemporary music be they audience, performer or composer are in fact creatively involved and united in searching for new worlds of sound. This engagement calls on all to respond spontaneously and flexibly utilising creative imagination. These new worlds initially exist in the imagination and whether it is through composing, performing or listening that these sounds are brought to life, it is the creative act of imagining that is central to the experience. In the words of the philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson ...music making is actually continual creation and recreation of music-a constant improvisation (Benson, 2003).

Appendix A

Composers Questions (Interview One)

Talk a little about your experience of collaboration with performers.

How did these experiences affect the work being created?

How are the pieces you have composed with collaboration and without different/similar?

How has collaborating with performers:

Affected your practice?

Impacted on you as a composer?

Influenced the works composed?

What types of collaboration have you experienced?

Do you have a favoured type?

How is transmission of musical ideas effected between composer, performer and audience?

How does collaborating affect:

Your creativity?

Your artistic satisfaction?

How do you see the relationship between composer, performer, and audience?

In summary can you talk a little about your attitude towards collaboration – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

References

- Barenboim, Daniel and Said, Edward (2003): *Parallels and Paradoxes*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Benson, Bruce, Ellis (2003): *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*. United Kingdom: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- McCutchan, Ann (1999): *The Muse that Sings*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nonken, Marilyn (2002): 'Vessels'. *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1.
- Roe, Paul (2005): *Private Interview with Ronan Guilfoyle (22/4/05)*. Dublin, Ireland.
- Roe, Paul (2004): *Composers Questions-Interview One (PhD Research)*. Dublin, Ireland.
- Roe, Paul (2005): *Private Interview with Jane O'Leary (22/4/05)*. Paris, France.
- Small, Christopher (1996 edition): *Music, Society, Education*. Great Britain: Calder.
- Small, Christopher (1998): *Musicking*. U.S.A.: University Press of New England. Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Santrauka

Bendradarbiavimo šiuolaikiniame komponavime ir atlikime fenomenologija

Pranešime nagrinėjami komponavimo proceso elementai ir jų sąsajos su atlikimo praktika. Komponavimo ir atlikimo procesai šiame tyrime laikomi vientiso šiuolaikinio muzikos komponavimo proceso elementais. Manoma, kad naujo muzikos kūrinio gimimo procese egzistuoja kelios pakopos: kompozitorius (kūrėjas), atlikėjas (interpretatorius) ir klausytojas (suvokėjas). Ši nepajudinama hegemonija tarsi suskirsto kūrėjus ir atlikėjus į skirtingas stovyklas, o tarp jų iškilę barjerai atitinkamai veikia ir klausytoją. Konceptualus ir filosofinis ribų tarp komponavimo, atlikimo ir klausymo perkėlimas – tai kelias į labiau integruotą šiuolaikinės muzikos pavidalą. koncepcija, kad muzika pagal savo prigimtį yra improvizacinė, suteikia ir muzikams, ir klausytojams galimybę kūrybiškiau joje dalyvauti. Rašydamas daktaro disertaciją Jorko universitete, daviau užsakymą penkiems žinomiems airių kompozitoriams parašyti solines pjeses (keliose iš jų panaudojant elektroniką), kurias pats turėjau atlikti. Vienas iš šio užsakymo tikslų buvo patyrinėti, įvairiomis duomenų rinkimo priemonėmis rūpestingai fiksuojant kūrybinio proceso eigą, dviejų menininkų bendradarbiavimą, jiems abiem suteikusį progą praktiškai pasidalyti kūrybine patirtimi. Pranešime nagrinėjama tyrinėjimų metodologija ir apžvelgiamos pirminės išvados, atskleidžiama komponavimo ir atlikimo procesų įvairovė.