



Contemporary Music in Action: performer-composer collaboration in the conservatoire

Mark Doffman, University of Oxford

Jean-Philippe Calvin, Royal College of Music



Towards collaboration 1

- The HME standard model
 - Separate paths for composers and performers
 - Individualised notion of progression within one's craft.
 - One to one tuition [Wollner & Ginsborg 2011]
- The limitations of the model
 - Restrictive view of learning to perform
 - The 'halo' effect [Abeles et al 1992)
- The response
 - Towards a mixed economy of learning [Jaques and Salmon 2007]
 - The functional benefits of collaborative learning
 - The professionalisation dividend for performers [Harrison 2013]
 - The compositional dividend [Partti & Westerlund 2013]
 - The ethics of collaboration [Gaunt & Westerlund 2013]

Towards collaboration 2

- Shifts in creative practices
 - The need for greater face to face work
 - Extended techniques/new notational paradigms
 - Radical moves towards and away from control on the part of composers.
 - Perceived desirability of working with others.

The case against...

'I mean, when you build a house and somebody delivers the bricks, the brick owner is not the owner of the house or not the architect, there is no way the brick factory can say this is our house, so I have no problem delivering bricks if the composer makes a beautiful house. But if the house is bad and falls apart, and the material is actually good, then I feel robbed. And also it has been worse, when a composer has a recording device, records the improvisation and writes it out and puts it in the piece, then there are issues'

Marco Blaauw, musikFabrik (June 2011)

Why this obsession with collaboration? One reason is surely the unquestioning adoption of business ideology within academia: ideas related to ‘brainstorming’ – despite the fact that it makes people less, rather than more, original – remain firmly entrenched both in the business world and in the ‘learning and teaching’ industry.

There is a sense that the very idea of the individual ‘creator’ has somehow had its day. What has changed? It seems implausible to imagine that a ‘workshopped’ version of the *Rite of Spring* would have turned out better, or to regret that the *Eroica* wasn’t conceived as a collaborative project. But to invoke such examples today in defence of solitary work invites the objection that one is in thrall to something called ‘the Romantic idea of the genius’

John Croft ‘On Working Alone’ in Clarke & Doffman (eds) ‘*Creativity, Improvisation and Collaboration*’ (forthcoming) OUP

Making sense of performer-composer?

- Hayden and Windsor [2007]
 - 3 forms of collaboration
 - Directive
 - Interactive
 - Collaborative
- Clarke, Doffman and Lim [2013]
 - Cultural, affective ownership of the process
 - The gap between flat institutional structure and the established work patterns between players, conductors and composers.

Performer-composer collaboration in the conservatoire

CMIA study

- Method: Interviews, a/v documentation of rehearsals for qualitative analysis
 - 3 ensembles / 6 individual interviewees / 1 group interview and access to course diaries/written accounts of the collaborations over three cohorts of the course.
- Our questions:
 - Why are students motivated to take this course?
 - What is the student experience of collaboration?
 - What forms do the collaborations take?

Student motivations 1

- Working on contemporary music
 - It is good to play music which is an expression of what is happening now (V.S., pianist)
 - It's exciting to hope that you might just find something new, and new stuff is probably going to happen (J.R., percussionist)

Student motivations 2

- Being at a point of transition
 - I think what is good is we are respected as postgraduates... I like the fact that we are just left to it as performers and composers, because that is why we are here and we are hoping to be professionals, and to be too micromanaged is annoying... (K.T., pianist)
 - It's just good that ... respect is given that you will go away and you will do your homework – you will write the piece, you will learn the piece. (M.S., composer)

Thick and thin collaborative experience

- Thick collaboration – transformative
 - I was surprised how much he talked about it. How much thought was behind it. When he spoke about it in one of the rehearsals, I thought it was very good...and I thought that that helped me a lot. It gave me a lot of respect for the piece then. (M.B., guitarist)
- Thin collaboration – functional
 - We had an initial meeting to decide what we were going to do, and then a secondary meeting with some drafts and sketches and whatnot a few weeks ago, and literally it's just my job now to go away, write the thing, and then he can play it. (P.A., composer)

The gap...performers

- Performers more than once expressed a sense of relative powerlessness in waiting for materials to be passed on to them for rehearsal and private practice. Some performers cited this as the major collaborative problem during the module.
 - The fact that it didn't get composed until the eleventh hour...that didn't help because it felt like 'He doesn't know what to do. He literally has no idea what to write'. I don't know, it just took him more time than it should. (M.B., guitarist)
- One clarinetist expressed some reservations about their work as being a collaboration at all,
 - I wouldn't say the project that I was involved in was a collaboration. I felt it was more the composer writing a piece and then the performers playing it, apart from having a bit of input in to choosing which end to use and asking for Section B to be longer. I think that was as far as the collaboration went. (RC, clarinetist)

The gap...composers

- Generally very positive view of the collaborations
 - I like that relationship between composers and performers because I think, sometimes it's very good to have someone to tell you "this is crap" or "have you thought about this?" or whatever; because sometimes if you are in your room writing, you can come up with a complete score that you think is great, but the only reason you think it is great is that you have been in it that deep for however long without showing it to anybody...(L.M., composer)
- Owning the process/owning the performers
 - 'my musicians' 'my violinist'

Concluding remarks

- Clear that a majority of students felt considerable personal benefit from working with others across the composition/performance divide.
- Also a sense in which the roles that the students inhabited were often too strongly defined to be capable of challenge or critical reflection through collaboration.
- As the world of musical work changes substantially, so conservatoires find themselves having to face the challenge of incorporating both their core traditions of teaching alongside more expansive approaches to the training and preparation of young musicians (Bennett 2008). One of the questions that this study prompts in thinking about music education, and collaborative music education in particular, is the degree to which such programmes can or should challenge existing creative relationships. Programmes such as CMIA raise important points about how to go about providing an educational programme that is rigorous yet adaptive, is creative yet grounded in the real world of musical work, and are a reminder to music educators (if it were needed) that art music production and education needs to continually reflect on the balance between working apart and together.