



Collaborative Composition, Writing and Performing

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I want to start my remarks on collaborative processes in composition with a description of how the research landscape has changed in the 20 years since I started my PhD at the University of Manchester, where Marcos Lucas and I first met. Back then, there were really only a couple of ways one could do a PhD in music. The first was to carry out musicological research, predominantly in an area of music history, or perhaps of theory, maybe through reconstruction of artifacts such as scores or instruments, or by looking through sketches of a composer's work to reconstruct their compositional method. Despite the variety of fields in which it was possible to research, the actual form of submission, that is, an 80,000 word thesis was the same. The only exception in music at the time was the compositional portfolio; in this model, which both Marcos and I followed, a series of pieces was composed accompanied by an analytical commentary of some 10,000 words which was meant to demonstrate that the candidate was familiar with a range of (mainly modernist) music, and in general could throw around a number of stylistic buzz-words. At least, that's what mine was like! I'm sure Marcos' was different... A candidate's suitability for PhD research was assessed by their submitting a few examples of written scores, and a statement that they intended to compose 6 or 7 pieces for a variety of ensembles – such was the “proposal”. The justification for this exceptional status accorded to composition was always that music had been part of the medieval *quadrivium*, and therefore composition was a special genre of thought, like mathematics, or theology. The *doing* of composition, recorded in a written score, was the research, leading some universities even to dispense with the need for a commentary.

In the interim period much has changed in UK research and elsewhere. The development of practice-based research in other areas, such as dance, theatre studies, computer programming and numerous other fields has meant that the exceptional status accorded to composition has become anomalous. Practice as research in other fields was expected by funding bodies such as the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) to

establish a research context, to address explicit research questions, and to define a rigorous methodology, while composers were still turning up making the medieval claim that the writing of composition in itself was research.

When added to the requirement placed on universities in 2007 to demonstrate that our research has measurable “impact” in the real world, the old hermetic model of composition, in which compositions only related to other compositions, and the only people able to assess a composer’s ability or even a composition’s status as research were other composers, tended to isolate composers from mainstream culture. Of course, when we sit down to write notes down, to conceive of a pattern or patterns which appear meaningful and original, what drives us is frequently something we are not conscious of. Part of the process of learning to be a composer is to learn to trust one’s instincts as they develop, and to recognize the strength of an idea when it arises. Often this is not the result of rigour, in the sense of scientific research methodologies, but the result of creative play and exploration. It would be a tragedy, and more to the point, *depressing*, if exciting and engaging music *could* be written using an explicit methodology designed at the outset, since there would be no spark of intuition and no surprise in the creative process. So there have to be ways in which other questions, which move beyond the hermetic realm of note-choice (although I do find these questions interesting), can be asked. What I want to explore, with reference to a couple of my recent projects, is the way that moving beyond the written score as the sole location for ‘the research’ can be methodologically more rigorous for research purposes, address real-world issues, and still leave room for the kind of intuitive response most of us as composers are still wedded to.

I define three kinds of collaborative composition:

1. Collaboration with other ‘writers’, such as Marcos Lucas’ and my 2012 opera *Stefan and Lotte in Paradise*. Here, although the role of the composer is clear, it is split between two composers, who agreed to share material and a method of working. More conventional forms of collaboration come with collaboration with text writers, such as my long time collaborator Philip Goulding, who wrote the text for this opera and many others of my pieces. The fact that it’s not unusual for a composer to collaborate with a writer, but it is for a composer to collaborate with another composer in no sense changes the nature of the collaboration, which functions prior to the written score.

2. Collaboration with other disciplines, such as my 2009 oratorio which set a scientifically accurate narrative of the formation of the universe, and was a collaboration with astronomers from the Jodrell Bank observatory. Here the music is serving a purpose – a social *Gebrauchsmusik*, if you like. My research student and I are currently collaborating on a bid with a sociologist on data sonification of weather data, for example – here the music is a relatively minor part, but we’re being asked to be composers for a purpose.
3. Collaboration with performers.

It’s this latter, most traditional, form of collaboration in composition that I want to describe in the pieces I’ll be talking about. But first, we need to look at the role of the written text in composition, the score.

The score as locus of authority vs the score as discussion document

The most extreme form of the authoritarian view of the composer as authority was articulated by Stravinsky in his lectures given at Harvard University in 1939-40, and which subsequently appears as his *Poetics of Music*. Stravinsky presents two idealized forms of the performer, the *executant* and the *interpreter*. The difference between them he presents in moral terms, that is, in terms of *faithfulness* to a written score:

“Sin against the spirit of the work always begins with a sin against the letter.”

The written score stands in for the composer as the authority over how the piece should be played, and any performer who goes beyond the written intentions of the composer is harshly condemned. While it’s clear that Stravinsky in an ideal world would prefer his performers solely to be executants, he recognizes that this is limited by the nature of notation:

“no matter how scrupulously a piece is notated...it always contains hidden elements that defy definition, because verbal dialectic is powerless to define musical dialectic in its totality”.

Thus, undesirable though it may be, the ideal performer is also an interpreter, in addition to an executant.

The opposite pole to this composer-performer relationship is described by the musicologist Richard Taruskin in an article called ‘On Letting the Music Speak for Itself’. Taruskin recalls observing the composer Elliott Carter who, on being asked by a violinist how

to perform a particularly tricky rhythmic passage, responding “I don’t know, let’s see” and joining in with the musicians in a discussion of the best way to perform the passage.

This was the model of collaboration I adopted in composing my 2013 piece for neo-Baroque trio Trio Aporia, consisting of Baroque flute, viola da gamba and harpsichord – and electroacoustic track, which I eventually called *Advices and Queries*. I named it after a small tract published by the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, who were formed in the North of England in the 1650s, and were remarkable for their plain clothing, their form of worship which is almost completely silent, and the absence of hierarchy. It is the opposite, in other words of the Baroque, though contemporaneous with the style.

Initially, I was motivated by two ideas – not yet research questions, but which would form the basis of the questions the piece examines in a practical way. The first was, frankly, an embedded discomfort for Baroque art – for the display, ornamentation and in addition, the perceived scholasticism of the Historically Informed Performance movement. This observed distaste led me to my second motivation; about a year earlier, some friends had taken me to the oldest purpose-built Quaker meeting house in the world, a small plain building of stone and wood construction dating from 1674. The style of worship taking place in Quaker meetings (particularly in the UK) depends heavily on silence, but on occasion, the silence can give way to spoken “ministry” – short statements of a religious or spiritual nature which Quakers believe are motivated by the light of God dwelling in all human beings. Although I don’t personally subscribe to this theology, I find the radical formlessness of this act of worship fascinating. There are no priests or preachers – merely an openness to religious insight whenever and in whomever it may arise. As a musician I couldn’t fail to be aware of the important examination of these two aspects in contemporary music – the importance of silence in Cage’s work, and the importance of open forms in improvised and open scored music.

Given they play early instruments, the first thing we did was to meet in London at the Royal College of Music, and I had the opportunity to explore the possibilities of sounds they are capable of. The piece also involves electronic and recorded soundscapes, and some of these were generated by this early meeting. The score I eventually wrote became more like a discussion document, and is at times organized so as to allow many different combinations of material, with no single musician deciding the outcome.

I initially wrote a fixed medium soundscape (like a film or a tape), but the trio asked me to find a way in which they could control the timing, so I completely re-organised the recorded sound part so that everything could be triggered in performance by me. This

proved much more satisfactory, as I was able to respond to their body language and physical communication to trigger the sounds exactly on their cue. Although the musical language is not at all like jazz, the experience of playing with the musicians, and of responding in a flexible way to their performance, reminded me of playing with jazz musicians. I felt comfortable as a fellow musician, doing my thing, while they do theirs. It is a republic, not a kingdom: appropriate to the subject matter, which is all about the silence of Quaker meeting. Like Elliott Carter, I would join in with the musicians in seeking solutions to problems, caused when what I'd imagined didn't turn out right, often flute lines which didn't work. The ensemble can also decide how long a passage should last, and also at times they have a choice about which material can be played. My experience of interacting with the musicians is that because at the point of the music I called the "ministry" section, even I as composer don't know what is going to be played, it feels as though the other players have much more ownership over the music than I do. I may have written the gestures, but the order and combination is under the players' collective control. One further consequence of the fact that the score does not – and cannot – perform its expected function of describing the totality of the music work. And because it doesn't have that descriptive function, it makes it clear that the piece is not identical with the score, but is partly the experience of the players, partly experience of the audience. As the composer, I have even forgotten much of the material of the open scored section, so that it no longer seems like "my own".

What would the research questions to this piece be?

Well, typically, I am formulating the research questions after writing the piece, and I think that's inevitable if the 'surprise' of the creative investigation is to be maintained. They might be:

- Can music replicate experiences of silent worship?
- Can silence be placed at the centre, rather than at the margins of a piece and still keep an audience's attention?
- Can open scoring be used in combination with linear scoring?

I've since been in further discussions with the trio about some new pieces for them, in which the research context borrows from the French poststructuralist philosopher Giles Deleuze. In retrospect, many of the ideas *Advices and Queries* explores could be seen to be related to Deleuze's exploration of the Baroque, *The Fold*. This text dwells on the relationship between the external and internal, and on the corporeal versus the spiritual; and

the form of *Advices and Queries* follows the listening body from outside the meeting house, to inside, where the body makes settling down noises, to an internal mental space, and then the process is reversed. This is the geometry of living described by Deleuze in *The Fold* (although I didn't know it then), and could, in retrospect, be used to form the research context of the piece.

What's original about the piece is not the notes themselves, but the way in which they are used to construct a sonic narrative using a combination of 18th century and 21st century technologies. None of the research questions are related to choice of notes, and I wouldn't want to claim any special status for these; instead they are related to the way music as a time-based artform is uniquely placed to recreate a spiritual experience from the inside.

In my second example of collaboration with performers, the question is in many ways simpler and clearer. I was talking to the poet and broadcaster Ian McMillan about writing something, and we decided to write an opera. Ian is a performance poet, and his writing is more or less indivisible from his very distinctive voice. He has a radio programme on BBC Radio 3, the national classical music and arts channel, and is loved by audiences for his informal and warm delivery, his infectious enthusiasm for often complex intellectual ideas. He also has a pronounced South Yorkshire accent, so it immediately prompted the question whether we could write an opera in Ian's own accent. This may seem like a simple matter; but opera training in any country tends rigorously to enforce particular pronunciations felt to be variously 'correct', 'educated', or 'standard'. In English, for example, Kathryn LaBouff's *Singing and Communicating in English* (2007) discusses several examples of regional variants, yet Northern English accents are not mentioned at all. Anecdotally, trained opera singers respond that the Northern accent is "not possible to sing in" because the vowels are too short, too flat, not Italianate enough. Obviously this is nonsense, since it's possible to sing operatically in hundreds of languages throughout the world. Northern English vowels do tend towards the short – we pronounce N [bath] rather than S [bath], but not all of them. Lancashire and Yorkshire accents tend to use a long monophthong [train] which is the same vowel as German *Tränenregen*. Many more examples exist where the demands of language intelligibility would have an impact on word setting. In Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish, for example, there is an important difference between long vowels and short vowels. Hungarian composers of choral music tend towards the syllabic, rather than the melismatic in their settings, and that is a direct result of the difference between long and short vowels in the language.

While this may initially appear to have only a limited significance, if you ask any British person, questions about accents immediately become politicized, since regional accents also convey information about class status in English. It's as if all of Brazil's political class spoke with a pronounced Sao Paulo accent, and this accent in particular was represented as being 'neutral'. What's called Received Pronunciation in English was developed between Oxford and London by the aristocracy in the early 19th century, and has nothing to do with either working class Oxford or London accents. The cathedral choir singing tradition so important in Oxford and Cambridge developed into a rigidly enforced code for all classical singing, so that even the Northern choral societies aspired to this 'correct' pronunciation. When I was working recently on music for a radio drama set in a Yorkshire coal mine, we collaborated with our local male voice choir. I (naturally, I thought) asked the choir to sing with their normal accents as, in the particular scene in the drama, the choir is supposed to be a group of miners singing. The choirmaster told me – half joking – that I'd undone in seconds the work of years to get them to pronounce the texts 'correctly' – that is, in 'Received pronunciation'. Opera funding makes up nearly a quarter of the total arts funding budget for the UK, and what's odd is that the question has never arisen of why opera is always sung in the accent of the ruling classes, when it's mainly paid for by the taxes those who are excluded from being represented by opera. If Scotland had gone independent from the rest of the UK in the recent referendum, I'm sure it would have arisen.

So, with an eye on this wider context, I obtained some funding from Arts Council England to explore the possibility of an opera OF the North, rather than IN the North, with singers. We now have the aim of producing a full opera sometime in 2015 or 2016. It's essential to be able to try out ideas with performers since, as we've seen, unless the rhythm of the spoken language is reflected in the written text, the language is not intelligible, and in any case singers will default to their trained sung accent.

Since nobody has ever tried to make a Northern accented opera before, there's no established method to train the singers, so we have tried two different approaches. I knew straight away I'd need help so I enlisted the aid of my colleague from linguistics, Philip Tipton, whose research is in the area of socio-linguistics, specifically on mapping the area where in the North of England – particularly southern Lancashire - the word [square] is pronounced to rhyme with [fur]. I also enlisted the help of Omar Ebrahim, a contemporary music opera singer who is originally from Rotherham, S. Yorkshire, and who sang the role of the "Northern Shepherd" in Harrison Birtwistle's musical theatre piece *Yan Tan Tethera*. I

also got Conrad Nelson, composer and associate director at Northern Broadsides – a theatre company specializing in Northern accented Shakespeare productions involved.

In terms of methodology, I first got Ian McMillan to record the texts. Then I wrote some provisional settings using the rhythms of the recordings in the traditional way. We sent these to the singers along with the recordings of Ian reading the texts. We also translated the readings of these texts into IPA, the International Phonetic Alphabet, which many singers use to perform in languages they don't speak. The singers who were not all originally from the North of England, used these to develop their performances. Here are some audio examples of the results of this project:

Before I finish, I'd like to return to the idea of the provisional nature of the score, and its status as written text. Close readings of written texts – particularly philosophical texts - by literary theorists such as Derrida and Paul de Man showed how behind the façade of logic and reason, language itself often concealed hidden lacunae, which means that the 'meaning' of the texts is radically destabilised. The reader no longer has a passive role as recipient of the author's meaning, but instead actively *constructs* a meaning. The text is in this understanding now a *provisional* document, awaiting the constructed meanings provided by the reader.

In many ways this mirrors the role of the written score in the collaborative projects I've been outlining reflects the provisional status of the text in post-structuralism. The active role of the reader in constructing the text's meaning is similar to the active role of the performer in interpreting the score. But as we've heard in the Stravinsky quotation, the performer's role is strictly controlled, in order that the score attain the status believed to be possessed prior to the writings of Derrida. For the hermetic compositional model, the written text is the end of the research process. But as Taruskin points out, the score is as much the starting point for the research process – the score is a proposal, a thesis, tested in the form of the performance process. The research and development process has not yet resulted in a 'final' score in the opera, but even while the R and D process employed to develop a compositional response to the possibilities of Baroque instruments did result in some kind of score, the world of the piece is formed anew each time it is performed. The score is a record of my explorations of the sound world of the performers; and the performance is a record of the players' exploration of the world of the piece.