"Outside the Box: Practice, Participation and Method in Live Electronic Music"
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Digital Musicking & Co-hear-ence

I: Introducing and reflecting upon Owen’s conference framework
Owen’s ‘hypothesis’ “The central theme is that whilst live electronic musicking is
wonderfully diverse and inventive, we are hindered by ongoing absences of shared
languages (be they verbal, sonic, gestural or whatever). In lieu of being able to
communicate with each other (and other colleagues) about our practices we too often
take refuge behind technological descriptions.”

My hypothesis I think that it makes sense that music makes sense.

Squaring the circle with Owen’s hypothesis Without shared languages, without
musical communication, much live electronic music (or other form of contemporary
musicking) will not make sense to most people who will ever hear it.

My first ‘2 pennies’ worth’ If the above is true: a) the diplomatic way of putting it:
there is a great deal of room for improvement; b) the more cynical way of putting it:
we are our own best enemies in terms of our music’s dissemination, our creating
interest and offering access to what we feel so passionate about.

Furthermore, technological descriptions are undoubtedly useful and, at times,
necessary. My view, as editor of “Organised Sound” is, however: such descriptions
function best when their applicability and/or potential relevance are made known.
This helps to define who will benefit from the technology. Similarly music is made
for one or more communities of participants and listeners and musicians should take
account of this when they make music, as it is part of the inherent nature of musical
communication. This brings us back to Owen’s point of departure.

Owen again “An absence of shared languages is a barrier to participation and
collaboration [LL: and I would add appreciation], and, as such, to the sociality and
sustainability of live electronic music cultures.”

My response I fully agree with Owen’s view and perhaps he should thus be offering
this keynote talk. I believe this situation is due to what I have often called an ‘island
mentality’ (and all Brits present should know what I mean by this). Whether ‘the me
era’ that commenced in the 70s is the culprit or some mishmash related to crosstalk
between modernism and postmodernism (which isn’t easy to describe, so we won’t go
there during the rest of this talk), I cannot really say, but the presence of artists
allergic to being placed in contexts ‘influenced by’ or ‘associated with’ others is fairly
common. Is this really an acceptable state of affairs? (I should note that one of the
consequences of this is the relative lack of clear genres in the area. We shall return to
this issue later on.)
I would like to react to this situation with what some of you may perceive to be a conservative view, namely, that music appreciation is inherently based on associating a musical work with lived experience. There may have been many radical musical departures in the 20th century, but some never gained sufficient gravitas due to the fact that listeners and even performers had little to relate to in order to interpret and understand the works. Music is about making connections; it is about sharing and, at the end of the day, it is about communicating, not necessarily in the obvious literal sense – much music is quite abstract after all – but instead in terms of people relating what they listen to with what they have experienced before. (By the way, the same can be said about food and many other aspects of our daily lives!)

*Another key point of Owen’s* “As researchers, we would benefit significantly from sharing and developing documentary practices that are sensitive to how diffuse the various aspects of live electronic music are across various types of artefact and experience. This would aid communication and increase reflexivity, making us more aware of the types of knowledge that are taken for granted, with implications for how we communicate with artists and interested parties from different backgrounds.”

*My thoughts on the matter* This is a dynamic idea, yet equally the trickiest point of those at the foundation of this event. What do I mean by this? I think we need to be very clear about why we create these new documentary processes. Through an established collaboration between the Music, Technology and Innovation research Centre at De Montfort University where I work and the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) in Paris, I have been involved in the planning (although not the execution) of a project focused on digital archiving of fixed medium and, to a lesser extent, live performance works involving technology. One of the debates that I have been involved with in such projects has been: what are we doing this for? What exactly do we want to get out of such initiatives beyond the creation of ‘permanent’ versions of our artistic output? Isn’t it true that immortality is dead for much of today’s music? So what are we doing this for? In fact there are several answers to this question that are potentially exciting. Offering access to potential listeners is one; making works ‘portable’ beyond the life span of a particular technology, another. And there are many others, too.

The second half of Owen’s remark is intriguing as it is not an obvious implication of documentary practices: “how we communicate with artists and interested parties” whilst acknowledging what is “taken for granted”. What is taken for granted? That’s worthy of a conference in itself, believe it or not. It has been the downfall of much new music in my humble opinion. Therefore, future efforts should focus on teasing out this point and its extraordinary relevance. Stating that documentation is related to communication and not: a) immortality and b) archiving for the sake of it is a powerful, ambitious and, above all, inspired goal.

*Owen’s third point* “Technology … can be as much hindrance as help. Frequent shifts in the technological base and rapid obsolescence interfere with the maturing of practice, and with our ability to discuss it. We need to develop discourse that is meta-technical in order to make ourselves more robust to technological changes of this sort.”
My supporting view  The word that Owen hasn’t mentioned here that is clearly relevant is ‘virtuosity’. As we jump between generations of technology, we tend to end up on a constant learning curve which is good to keep the brain muscles developing, but perhaps less beneficial in terms of the subject of communicative success in digital musicking. Furthermore, there is an unspoken assumption that technological development is synonymous with progress. To put it mildly, I am by no means convinced that this is always the case. Owen is again relating technological change with practice and related discourse. These points are completely consistent with his hypothesis, so I would be astonished to discover anyone disagreeing with this view unless there is a technological equivalent of art for art’s sake (and, if it does exist, this is by no means something that I personally would celebrate or support).

Owen’s fourth and final remark “A trend in collaborative live electronic musicking has been for improvisation. It’s great that this has been rehabilitated into respectability, but... Do we improvise so much because the lack of shared languages makes it too hard to do anything else? Are we at risk of repeating the prejudice of the last century in reverse by abandoning compositional approaches?”

My thoughts regarding this final point I can remember being furious when I read Eric Salzman’s key music survey of 20th century music as an undergraduate in which he attempted to demonstrate that improvisation was not composition. Although our discussion is not about composition per se, it involves the composition process as well as the process of musical presentation and it is for this reason that I am happy with Owen’s use of Christopher Small’s term musicking today. At our university we have stopped offering modules focusing on the distinction between composition and performance in terms of digital music making as it is based on a largely irrelevant model, at least as far as live electronic music is concerned, with deep roots in the past. What I shall say about Salzman’s error is that he is referring to music’s equivalent of fixed medium works where the score is the fixed medium. He was unable, I believe, to comprehend the act of spontaneous composition or, for example, the role of interpreters as co-composers in the performance of graphic scores. I would suggest, therefore, that the improvisers involved with live electronic performance are at least co-composers thus making the composition/performance distinction slightly dated.

Returning to Owen’s statement, I do not see improvisation an sich as a cop out. What I do believe is that there is something else taken for granted or ignored in much live electronic performance and that it is the intention reception loop. When people are natural improvisers, such as John Bowers and my colleague, John Richards and many others here in the UK and abroad, this does not necessarily mean that this loop is being addressed. Perhaps they believe that it isn’t necessary, but I would suggest that connections with lived experience are a sine qua non to avoid an elitist in-crowd form of music. Shared languages should aid the intention reception loop and thus the lived experience aspect I have referred to in introducing this talk. All live electronic musicians should give this some considerable consideration in my view.

As far as Owen’s final sentence is concerned: I think that the ‘me era’ issue has to do with many people’s ignoring compositional approaches. Abandoning them is, of course, another way of saying it. Let me add another thought regarding this point.
**My 2nd ‘two pennies’ worth** The drive towards uniqueness combined with a natural desire to be involved with innovative practices, often further combined either with a dose of complexity or what many listeners would consider to be alienating sounds lead towards: a) marginalisation; b) the lack of discourse that Owen has declared war upon by way of this symposium; and c) an attitude that could be read as, with my bow and arrow aimed at Milton Babbitt, who cares who listens to our music? I consider these three points to be all rather sorrowful, something in dire need of betterment and a self-created disaster for contemporary music making.

**My 2nd hypothesis** Anyone who considers Owen’s hypothesis to be valid should consider how we musicians might do something about this situation. The idea that ‘scholars’ and others, whoever they may be, will do this work for us is farcical. Although I do not believe that digital music studies needs to be undertaken by musicians themselves at all times, they have at least to engage with these issues in word and deed as well as feed information to interested parties. This would have an enormously positive influence in terms of: our understanding of live electronic musicking; Owen’s goal of shared languages both in terms of performance and the listening experience; and the need for this music to be given its rightful place in terms of the broader spectrum of music making in today’s society, that is, addressing and, in consequence, improving the socio-cultural position of digital musicking.

**II: A few random thoughts I have published that might be relevant**

In the previous decade I published a paper in which, following the inspiring words of Herbert Marcuse, I spoke of the confrontation between quality and quantity in new music, especially experimental music. I would like to recycle five of them here.

**Idea 4:** There is an overabundance of musical languages today. I hardly need to embellish this remark. Even as a student I was often depressed by how concerts involving multiple composers (or even a single one) jumped from musical language to musical language as if it were the most natural thing to do. The implication was that we listeners ‘speak’ many more musical languages than spoken ones. This is for many of us most likely true; nonetheless, the number that we can truly appreciate (read: understand) is much more limited than the output of contemporary music made in the latter half of the previous century. This continues today. Please note, that, for example, being involved with electronica or noise or dirty electronics by no means suggests a musical language. They are all categories of musicking of course. I have already suggested that music is about making connections. To do this, the links need to be something more than ad hoc. The reality of too many languages is simply not helpful in terms of making those connections.

To challenge this rather splintered map of new music, I have introduced a new musical term, co-hear-ence which is intended to suggest that music makes connections with lived experience as well as with other music which in turn helps us to better understand it and know how it is best placed (thus making it easier to find it in the wealth of new music offerings when we are searching for a particular type of music or aesthetic).

**Idea 15:** After thesis (600 years of European music history) and antithesis (the two periods of revolution in music of the last hundred years), the time for Hegelian synthesis is now due. This should characterise tomorrow’s new music. All right, that
was a vision paper more than one focused on scientific fact, but I stand by the suggestion today. In recent publications on sample-based music, I talk about the tension between tradition and innovation. Even the most radical of live electronics musicians is not oblivious of or ignoring tradition. He or she may not be acknowledging it, but there is truly very little music made \textit{ex nihilo}. I would suggest, and this may be an unwelcome suggestion, that through the acknowledgement of how traditions are being treated innovatively, we might just be offering our potential listeners and co-musicians some things with which to connect. This is no act of copping out or of weakness, but instead the simple reality that we are all building on something and that is exactly what I was suggesting when bringing Hegel into the equation. Too many experiments are launched, not properly understood or appreciated and binned. Why not take the time to evaluate the use of such experiments and develop or merge them into more satisfying results? Clearly, the word ‘satisfying’ will mean different things to different people, but that debate will offer yet another manner of making connections.

\textit{Idea 19: Participation will return to music making. It will no longer be music equals tell people what to do; it will be music made through a collective evaluative process of devising} You attending this one-day conference should need no elaboration of this point. Many of you create and improvise works collaboratively and, on occasion, collectively. I realise that many collaborations are forms of ‘instant composing’, but that can be a risky operation if the tradition/innovation balance is not worked out beforehand; in other words, if the potential connections to be made are left unknown, we are more involved with art for art’s sake than communicative musicking as it is clear that Small came up with this word with communication as a \textit{sine qua non}. The art for art’s sake \textit{Haltung} of particular groups of musicians was the basis of his key gripe against some forms of contemporary music.

\textit{Idea 26: Music as celebration will take on a range of new forms. It may still take place in a church or disco, at a rave or any other form of concert, in the community or even in the CD–ROMed home or anywhere with tomorrow’s walkman. Each community will be able to define its own celebration(s)} I considered not including this idea, but decided it was quite relevant to the discussion as it takes us out of content and moves the focus to performative circumstances. Musicking is inherently connected with liveness and embodiment. Even listening to a recording of live electronic music, we are not to focus solely on a reduced listening strategy in most cases, but hopefully get a sense of the physical effort involved with music making and thus place ourselves within the performance circumstance (or ritual) of the recording.

Please allow me to get something off my chest at this point. I detest laptop performance where the visual element is, if anything, less interesting than a composer diffusing a fixed-medium piece in a darkened hall. Worse still is when the performers seem to be ‘grooving’ with their music whilst the music isn’t engaging listeners in the same manner. It seems to be a taboo to share this particular thought yet I can’t help but find these practices decadent (not to mention amateurish) in a sense as well as the work of onanists which is not a particularly kind thing to say. The bottom line here is the combination of taking one’s listeners into account as well as the consciously chosen means of presentation with all that this entails. This is what Owen is referring to when he writes, ‘shared languages’, shared between musicians and also shared between musicians and their listeners.
Idea 27: In terms of tomorrow’s technology we can expect new developments where interactive feedback is possible and individual human taste is taken into account. This makes technology less impersonal and will broaden applications enormously. This final idea goes beyond today’s topic but nonetheless takes two things into account: a) the increase of consciousness regarding who is listening, thus increasing the importance of an intention reception loop; b) more importantly, it suggests a return to something dear to Christopher Small, that music making, musicking is a communal activity where everyone present participates in one way or another. With the rapid developments in user-based input in performance, we are seeing new opportunities evolving. I welcome this, but believe that we should be just as conscious of the loop in circumstances where this type of built-in input mechanism is simply perceived as opposed to wired.

I would like to recycle one final personal view that I consider to be of importance here before moving on. This one was launched in both of my books that were published in 2007; it was teased out in particular in the less known book entitled *The Music of Sounds*. This has to do with the genre vs. category issue I have already raised. It is my view that a sound-based music paradigm exists; I use the term as a synonym for sonic art but take two things into account: a) it is music, not just art, and b) I am talking about music in which the note is not the key focus. This paradigm is based on the combination of the experience of construction, of performance, of intention and of listening to this type of music. One particular view I have developed based on the research that led to the new term and the paradigm related to that term is that the traditional pop music/art music separation is actually hardly relevant to a good deal of this music, including those forms of sound-based music focused on digital performance.

The placement of this music is a subject that is vital to the success of Owen’s wishes. Without this, the music is in a sense amorphous. It fits where one wants to place it, which is great if you are into flexibility; less so if you are interested in access and dissemination. I therefore have raised this point to emphasise the need for musicians to be aware of their music’s context and where it is best placed, underlining my goal of making connections.

Let us now move on to taking these ideas and placing them into a more scholarly context.

**III: The need for improved scholarship in Live Electronics Studies**

In my better known 2007 book, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, the third chapter sets out to create a framework for what I call sound-based music studies (something already researched whilst creating the structure of the index of the ElectroAcoustic Resource Site, EARS). I would like to start by sharing this framework. Here are the seven key areas:

1) Classification: from sound to work level
2) The listening experience
3) Modes of discourse, analysis and representation
4) Organising sound from micro to macro-level
5) New virtuosity
6) New means of presentation
7) Achieving interdisciplinarity and holism

The last of these is related to the obvious fact that we work in an extremely interdisciplinary area. The reason for including this one has to do with our being aware of this and acknowledging it in relevant circumstances. Just to cite one example, I would hope that you favour Music technology to music Technology. Some may favour Music Technology as well which mightn’t be a bad thing. This remark regarding emphasis allows us to tackle the question of how critical we are regarding the technology that we use. Holism has to do with practice informing theory and vice-versa as well as the capital letter issue that I have just presented.

The other six are the ones I would like to focus on for a little while. In a sense what they represent is obvious and it is interesting how two of them are especially relevant in terms of this symposium, namely five and six as they are dealing with performance-related aspects. Number four has to do with the construction of a work; number two the listening side of things including what musicians themselves hear. Number three in a sense ‘goes both ways’ as we musicians create musical discourses, eventually use scores and are analysing our work during many phases of the music making process whether consciously or otherwise. Finally the first one has to do with both the understanding of the materials we use, what we know about musical gestures increasing incrementally until we reach the level of how the musical works or a performance can be placed in broader contexts. The emphasis again is again our better means of classification.

Technology creeps in within several of these seven areas; the study of music does as well; and the socio-cultural context of the music pervades many of the seven elements of the framework proposed in the book.

Elsewhere in that chapter I bring up the subject of archiving and associate it with the first area dealing with classification. In fact archiving (or documenting) goes beyond the goals of the framework. So I have not ignored this important item on Owen’s list, but see it as something that co-exists with the above framework. It also represents one aspect of sustainability, but this again is totally interconnected with our ability to communicate within and about this music. I would like to suggest at this point that if we were to accept this framework or something like it, we would collectively be working towards a greater coherence related to the understanding of all aspects of our music as well as co-hear-ence in terms of the music’s placement.

IV: Final words
I believe without a doubt that there is a true need for wide-scale scholarship in the area of live electronics. It would largely fit into the framework that I have presented here. It would include documentation issues (what to document and why) and would finally address a major hole in the scholarship market, namely the area involved with performance practices including collaboration. It would look at music in terms of its content and its reception as well as its use of technology. This implies a greater understanding of the notion of the musical community. It would also look at the music as a cultural phenomenon, thus making a link between it and its societal role or position thus making a case for its sustainability. It is up to all of us to establish and help ourselves, and others, to make and share the connections that I have presented.
Owen has made the opening gambit by bringing us together today. It is now our duty
to help improve the lot of our music by understanding that this music does not live in
a vacuum. It is often indeed filled with vital connections and can and should reach a
‘more optimal’ audience. The input of ‘thinking artists’ into new scholarship, and the
creation of and support for relevant forms of categorisation and documentation is a
formula I propose to support digital musicking, communication related to digital
musicking, and, in consequence, co-hear-ence.

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