Performing the Scratch Orchestra's Nature Study Notes: creating and exploring a third sphere through improvised communal action.

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Abstract

In June 2014, a disparate group of trained and untrained performers gathered together at the Chisenhale Dance Space to perform items from the Scratch Orchestra's 1969 *Nature Study Notes.* The performance was not a nostalgic recreation of past practice, but was something new, growing from the practice of the group itself, and one which posed an interesting balance between individual and communal responsibilities and participations, indicative of a powerful engagement with contemporary and relevant practices that activate and negotiate individual and communal concepts of identity. This paper explores how we might theorise such an arena, situating this performance somewhere between community music and a manifestation of avant-garde art.

Biography

John Hails (b1978) is a composer, improviser, and lecturer based in Edinburgh, UK. Within his research, ethnomusicology, aesthetics, and music psychology form a symbiotic relationship with compositional and performative activities to produce new avenues of investigation. He is currently Senior Lecturer: Reader in Music at Edinburgh Napier University, and the director of the Applied Music Research Centre.

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> Community is not something to be magically recovered but a goal to be struggled for. It is not something to be manufactured by outside professionals but emerges out of collaboration and shared commitment and expression. Cultural work is an effective tool in the formation of community, it is a tool for activism. This definition does not see community in purely regional or geographic terms, it allows for the idea of communities of interest. It is also dynamic and accounts for the possibility of cultural practice being one of the processes whereby alliances form and cohere. (Hawkins 1993, 21)

The performers came to the front of the stage and burst into song. Or rather song**s**. Each singer sang their own song, a repertoire that included UK top 40 chart songs, children's songs, folk songs, 'Any Old Irons', and an Ode Machine written by Cornelius Cardew. The gesture was at once communal and individual, serious and comic, musical and noise.

This was the final gesture in a performance of the Scratch Orchestra's 1969 *Nature Study Notes* (Cardew ed. 1969) put on at the Chisenhale Dance Space in

London. *Nature Study Notes* is a collection of notations, largely text scores described as 'improvisation rites', composed and collated by members of what we would now term a collective of artists, musicians, trouble-makers, and thinkers. According to Cornelius Cardew's *A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution*, "An improvisation rite is not a musical composition; it does not attempt to influence the music that will be played; at most it may establish a community of feeling, or a communal starting point, through ritual." (Prévost 2006, 91). By any objective analysis, a significant number of the notations that make up *Nature Study Notes* fail to "not attempt to influence the music that will be played", but the importance of the "community of feeling" cannot be underestimated as the underlying motivation for the majority, if not all, of the notations.

The Improvisation Rites were one of five elements[1] of "repertory categories" (Prévost 2006, 90) envisaged for the Scratch Orchestra, a collective which brought together trained and untrained musicians to create music, and the Rites were principally used as 'warm-ups' at meetings as members arrived and before the 'business' of the meetings began (Cardew 1972, 9)[2]. The idea of performing a concert made up solely of Rites was alien to their conception (Finer 2014) and so the revival of these notations in this context (spearheaded by Stefan Szczelkun, who in the days of the Scratch Orchestra was a member of the subgroup of 'Slippery Merchants' that acted as an internal 'irritant' and provocation to continuously question concepts of authority, mission, and consensus) could be seen as inauthentic at best, and disrespectful at worst. Without wishing to minimise the importance of the historically informed discussion to be had on this topic, the evidence of the performance itself (which can be heard in full at http://soundcloud.com/nethersage/nss-140628-simple-stereo-mixdown) and of the participation of and approval of former original Scratch Orchestra members points towards a successful adaptation which grew directly out of the notations themselves

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[1] The others categories are 'Scratch Music', 'Popular Classics', 'Compositions', and 'Research Project'.

[2] In the context quoted here, Cardew is describing Scratch Music as a genre separate from Improvisation Rites, although Carole Chant has confirmed that Rites were frequently used for this purpose (and indeed, from casual comparison between pages of *Scratch Music* and the *Nature Study Notes*, it seems clear that the boundaries between the two categories were porous at best).

and the performers rather than in an attempt to slavishly imitate an unrecoverable ideal of a performance practice[3].

At the core of the performance were the interplay of individual and communal responsibilities and participations. Many of the performers who prepared the notations had performed John Cage's *Song Books* at Café Oto in 2013, a work in which each performer is required to pursue their own interpretation of the score independently of everyone else (an anarchic musical community)[4]. What fundamentally differed in the case of *Nature Study Notes* was that its preparation required the establishment of a number of small ensembles existing within the overall ensemble. The idea of selecting specific Rites to be interpreted by the entire ensemble in turn was rejected by a (not unanimous) majority at an early stage of proceedings in favour of a more flexible approach. This approach proved challenging for a rather diasporic group of busy performers, particularly since all meetings prior to the performance itself comprised of discussion rather than rehearsal, but I believe that it opened up a fascinating approach to the construction of a musical community that, rather than relying on established performance practice or managerial hierarchies and without falling back on the brilliance of individual performers divorced from contingencies of ensemble, instead drew the mechanics of its functioning from seemingly spontaneous alliances and their dissolution. Individuals selected Rites that they wanted to perform, and then these were shared in meetings and on Google Docs, and, with negotiation, a structure of a performance emerged.

If we take Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Bürger 1984) as a re-constitution of the *garde* as society itself rather than the institution of art or music (which, metaphorically speaking, wishes to establish a garrison, complete with corner shops and branches of McDonalds), with the *avant-garde* forming a

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[3] My notes from a 'debriefing meeting' held after the performance record Carole Chant reflecting on the difference in the collaborative aspects between original performances and the Chisenhale incarnation, before questioning if those earlier forms of collaboration could ever or should ever be recovered.

[4] It should probably be noted here that the very nature of the individual Songs within the *Song Books*, especially when taken in conjunction with the performance practice of Cage scores in general suggest themselves an awareness of the other activities taking place in the space (a nuance arguably not present in Cage's entire output – see Piekut 2011), and the preparation of a performance does not necessarily rule out strategy for the management of forces and materials and, indeed, Cage's own reaction to previous performances of the work suggest that this might in fact be desirable (Kotik 1993).

community of artists attempting to progress the cause of society[5], I believe that we can posit the Chisenhale performance as a manifestation of avant-garde sound art. Bürger characterises one element of the avant-garde practice as dissolving the distinction between art as produced artefact and the production of that artefact, as well as dissolving the distinction between artist and audience (Bürger 1984, 51-53) and mentions Tzara's and Breton's work as attempting this dissolution ("But such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis" (Bürger 1984, 53)). In this context, many aspects of *Nature Study Notes* are clearly avant-garde:

- the dissolution of individual identities (the Rites in *Nature Study Notes* are ordered numerically in the order in which they were composed, irrespective of the composer (although the identity of individual composers has been retained through the use of initials and the explanatory notes at the end), a process that Cardew was to take further in *Scratch Music* (Cardew 1972) with authorship only decipherable through a graphic index);

- the necessity of the performer to interpret the notation and to invent the sounding (or non-sounding) result (thus dissolving the distinction between composer and sound-producer and thus art and life);

- the dissolution between audience and performers (as related by Carole Chant as she recounted Scratch Orchestra performances in the 70s) (Chant 2014).

Lee Higgins' (Higgins 2012) exploration of community music as a field outside of formal institutions (Higgins 2012, 5) (and, one assumes, profit-driven circumstances) opens up a second avenue of attack to *Nature Study Notes.* Although arguably the whole ethos of the Scratch Orchestra at the point of its founding was to dissolve leadership hierarchies, Cardew felt unable to resist his coronation as benign monarch (Tilbury 2008), and as a "skilled music leader", facilitated the "group music-making experiences" (Higgins 2012, 5). In the context of the Chisenhale performance, Szczelkun actively resisted the temptations of leadership and left the structuring of the event provocatively open. Despite the slight feeling of panic that this engendered in some participants at the start of the project,

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[5] I am not unaware of the unproblematic way I have phrased this, with Bürger's intent seemingly contradicted by his own writings and by those of others (e.g. Iddon 2008).

the lack of a 'skilled music leader' intervening in the process arguably created the energy that drove the performance. So, hardly a textbook example of community music, but it is worth pursuing this line of thought further.

Higgins discusses the interaction between schools and community musicians later in his book, when he raises the importance of community music in inculcating democratization, citizenship, human rights, and tolerance in school children (Higgins 2012, 116). Arguably, much of Cardew's work (especially if we consider the Scratch Orchestra as such) aims to do just this: educate performers to become not just better performers but better human beings. This aim was attenuated significantly when he discovered and was converted to the teachings of the Marxist-Leninist party but runs as a thread throughout much of his endeavours. For Higgins as for Cardew, music and working through music holds the key to preparing for the future (although Cardew was to lose faith in music's ability to do anything as he busied himself in the work of the Party) and Higgins writes that "Activating a cultural democracy to come requires interstitial practices, one for which intervention, invention, dreaming, and faith form a backbone through which hospitality and friendship can emerge as a strategic praxis" (Higgins 2012, 173). This description could stand equally for the work of the Scratch Orchestra as for community music.

Many writings on choral music designed for directors (rather than ethnographical studies) focus on the practicalities of preparing a choir to sing repertory from the First World art music tradition and do not touch so much on the motivations for coming together. In *Pragmatic Choral Procedures* (Hammar 1984), Russell A Hammar proposes a number of 'drives' that he describes as "derived drives": "1. Desire to be with other persons; 2. Desire for attention from other persons; 3. Desire for praise and approval; 4. Desire to be a cause; 5. Desire for mastery" (Hammar 1984, 33-7). While the desire to be with other persons, musically if not physically, is something that drives most musicians drawn to ensemble scenarios (otherwise I imagine that we would be performing solo), in many ways the notations of the *Nature Study Notes* largely undermine the fulfilment of the other drives listed: one must share the attention derived; praise and approval are relative in a scenario where any wholehearted application to the notation is attempted; the individual should submit to the collective in terms of a cause; that which is to be mastered is elusive and evaporates as soon as it is apparently mastered. A performer coming to *Nature Study Notes* may well be motivated by these drives, but

part of the process of discussion around the notations and the group's intentions for the performance exposed the pointlessness of pursuing them in this context.

Hammar identifies two further drives: "drive towards success" and "drive towards the familiar" (Hammar 1984, 34) which are perhaps more apposite in this scenario. Success rather than mastery of the notations reduces the dominant position of a performer implied in the latter, and success in this context can be interpreted as rendering the notations themselves irrelevant, thus fulfilling their own evaporation as necessary temporary facilitators of action ("the player…can rise above the notation if he works through the notation….; this grasped, he may slough off the rules" (Prévost 2006, 18)). The drive towards the familiar is not neglected either and performers are encouraged to draw from their experience of the every-day by the notations, and to call upon the familiar as a springboard to construct the unfamiliar (a perfect example being provided by the diverse songs simultaneously sung at the close of the performance). Finally, Hammar suggests that a powerful incentive towards choral singing is the need for individual aesthetic expression: "Expressing oneself in music via the group dynamic acts as an integrating and socialising agency" (Hammar 1984, 34). It is this drive that I find the most appealing and appropriate in light of the Chisenhale performance containing within it the solitary discipline and interaction made possible by the adoption of individual notations and the formation of sub-groups to perform shared interpretations.

I would characterise a further drive towards choral singing as that of transcendence, of becoming part of something larger than oneself, and of trance. In a scenario where attention and approval are inevitably shared, and being 'noticed' within a choral texture is an act of transgression, one's aspirations inevitably become collective aspiration towards success. We surrender our inadequacies and strengths to the larger cause and escape from the limitations inherent in individual expression. Ruth Herbert characterises trance as "a decreased orientation to consensual reality, a decreased critical faculty, a selective internal or external focus, together with a changed sensory awareness and – potentially – a changed sense of self" (Herbert 2011, 5). Within a choral performance, the execution of the score and sublimation within the larger body becomes an all-consuming focus. Afterwards, a performer may be left elated, dispirited, and with a sense of being *changed.* The qualities of both transcendence and trance were present in the Chisenhale performance, and I felt myself released and able to improvise in the last moments in a way that I did not feel

able to without the crutch of notation – if one is realising a specific notation, improvisation outside of this notation can be a difficult door to find without transforming that performance into something that might violate communal ownership (and be ascribed as motivated by the "desire for attention").

The Chisenhale performance of *Nature Study Notes* as an expression of nationalism is a more problematic construction. Performers came from a variety of ethnicities and nationalities, and although the score is frequently considered a work of 'English Experimentalism', consideration in the context of this conference reveals questions about what it means to be a citizen of the UK and the ways in which a performance of this notation may articulate this citizenship. We are far from the 19th century conception of successful individualism being rooted in a national identity (Dahlhaus 1992, 37), and we seem closer than ever to any sense of nationalism being truly an imaginary and yet arguably the performance manifested a strong sense of place and community that at least resembles nationalism, even though it points not towards a set of physical boundaries, but towards a shared ethical and performative landscape that could comprise a Third Space, beyond home and work, within a Fourth World (scattered and virtual) community.

This community could be described, employing Habermas' writings, as a lifeworld comprising social interaction rather than abstract physical fact and location (Sitton 2003, 62). The lifeworld is constituted by a shared consensus regarding culture, society and personality, and Habermas regards its "emergence [as] part of human speciation itself" (Sitton 2003, 64). What makes this societal vision so attractive for me is the way in which he characterises the disintegration of a lifeworld: "Collectivities maintain their identities only to the extent that the ideas members have of their lifeworld overlap sufficiently and condense into unproblematic background convictions" (Habermas 1987, 136-7). In the Chisenhale performance, collectivities came and went dependent on the overlap of shared consensus regarding notations and ways to proceed. Performers came together in a process of shared recognition and interaction, and then went their separate ways when the underlying structure of the notation expired. At the same time, the performers were linked together in a shared lifeworld of the performance concept itself. The audience too were a part of this lifeworld, although as stationary participants. A series of worlds as soap bubbles forming and dissolving within the orbit of a larger bubble, itself part of a larger bubble, and so on.

The difficulty of discussing a musical work or performance as a reified object is well established (e.g. Goehr 2007), and this difficulty is intensified when dealing with a performance of a series of text scores with indeterminate outcome never intended to be performed as an independent work by the original creators. To discuss our realisation of these texts as a lifeworld rather than as the performance of a work brings together pleasingly many of the ideas of this paper. Whether we consider the performance of *Nature Study Notes* in Chisenhale as a manifestation of avant-garde art, or as an act of community music, or as something else, the shared imaginaries discovered and created by those onstage demonstrated the possibility of a multiplicity of interpenetrating definitions and identities.

> "The fluid relationships and community-forming engendered by tonight's performance can be seen as a rehearsal for the peaceful coexistence and non-judgemental acceptance needed to supercede the competitive anxiety that characterises current financialised interrelations" (England 2014)

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