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Polyphonic conversations

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In George Lewis’s wonderful and comprehensive presentation on Thursday evening, he set out a view of improvisation that put it at the centre of what he calls “human ways of knowing and doing”. George Lewis showed us, and talked about a number of people who have contributed importantly to this discussion, but he also showed us and talked about a number of non-human entities who - as he argued - have themselves contributed importantly to the discussion. We have heard some things about theories of mind, and about how the attribution of mind to a machine may not be the important discussion too have. So I am going to begin my presentation with a short consideration of our notion of the social; the mutual commitments to identity and respect that mark our understanding of the social, and I will try to expand that notion to fit with a vision of improvisation that includes more than simply human participants. This is a slightly complex argument, so I will do a short form, which I hope will give a rough idea of where I am going with that, then I’ll explore an example, and finally I’ll comment on why I find this particular topic of current interest.

John Oswald, in the interview that provides the heading for this presentation, invokes conversation as a paradigm for the processes at play in music improvisation. This clearly involves the inevitable sound of music with notions of turn-taking, provocation and reaction, and shared enterprise, and though Oswald admits that music improvisation has more things going on simultaneously than you might get in a conversation as normally understood, the connection clearly intends to imply that the sounds of music improvisation arise from a desire for some sort of social interaction. As Oswald says, “I think improvising comes naturally out of an interest in communication between people, particularly conversation.” This remark might simply be an attempt to invest music with a sort of commonplace ordinariness, to figure it as a normal, down-to-earth human activity,
associated with our normative improvisational skill with language in our daily interactions, but I want to consider the implications of taking music as a sort of conversation: the possible differences in commitments between music and language, and, in particular, I want to ask what is implied in the notion of the social?

I’ll begin this enquiry by looking at a passage of writing by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, Thomas Reid. In his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* of 1788, Reid writes:

I call those operations social, which necessarily imply social intercourse with some other intelligent being who bears a part in them. A man may see, and hear, and remember, and judge, and reason; he may deliberate and form purposes, and execute them, without the intervention of any other intelligent being. They are solitary acts. But when he asks a question for information, when he testifies a fact, when he gives a command to his servant, when he makes a promise, or enters into a contract, these are social acts of mind, and can have no existence without the intervention of some other intelligent being, who acts a part in them. Between the operations of the mind, which, for want of a more proper name, I have called solitary, and those I have called social, there is this very remarkable distinction that, in the solitary, the expression of them by words, or any other sensible sign, is accidental. They may exist, and be complete, without being expressed, without being known to any other person. But, in the social operations, the expression is essential. They cannot exist without being expressed by words or signs, (and known to the other party.)

This presents the social act as a moment of inter-subjectivity, where there is a sort of co-creation by the social group of something that takes place out in the open, not in the inner sanctum of anyone’s mind. As Richard Moran puts it,

From this ... perspective, speaking and testifying to some fact are not to be understood as providing a window to an otherwise inaccessible mental state, but as acts which require two distinct parties for their completion, each with their own role to play. (Moran 2018, 5)

Moreover, Reid’s assertion that the words or signs uttered must be already “known to the other party” stems from his belief in some sense before language, “by which we are sensitive to our world and to one another. It is not
learnt as a matter of habit and customs, but exists as an a priori condition of of our experience.” Thus the co-forming of the matter presented in social signs is underwritten by some sort of foundational representation of a common world, within which acts may be undertaken. Does music, as a similarly social act to language, also require “two distinct parties …, each with their own role to play … expressed by … signs … known to the other party.”? To return to John Oswald for a moment, when he says, “... what’s intriguing about the … improvised I do is that its more polyphonic than your average conversation …”, his comment most probably relates to the fact that music does not always proceed by the turn-taking that is common in language. However, it could be taken to imply that the conversation of musicking includes a whole range of ‘social voices’ other than the human performers, including instruments, histories, interactive technologies, and so on, and including of course those listening in. His characterisation of the activity as ‘conversation’ proposes it precisely as one of Reid’s “social operations”. Reid’s analysis of ‘social operations’ presents as the inter-subjective co-creation of “acts of mind” that locates these ‘acts’ out in some ‘space of expression’, where the production of the expression together with the social acknowledgment of that expression work together to produce the effect, which is quite specifically not simply the external echo of an internal or ‘solitary’ thought or feeling. This suggests what might be called a social role for every element of the production of music: polyphonic conversations being enacted amongst all of the participating entities. This leads to the extension of the concept of the social I wish to suggest.

That’s the short form thesis, but I want to extend and trouble this discussion in two further directions: first, I want to consider the implications of Reid’s invocation of “some other intelligent being”, and then I want to interrogate what Reid characterises as “social intercourse”, to see whether and in what ways this could apply to the elements of music improvisation. Music, of course, is most often regarded as a social enterprise, with all the psychological, political and existential commitments that entails. But the social, in this normal sense, seems to cover only the human participants. Might not an instrument, or a piece of computer software be co-creating an action that does not “peer into the mind” of either of them? Reid’s characterisation of the social while restrictive, is fundamentally ecological,
and seems to me to open the door to extending the notions of respect, identity and co-creation to non-human participants.

So, first “some other intelligent being”. As we have already heard in this conference, our view of what constitutes an ‘intelligent being’ has shifted in the current era. The old certainties, that intelligence - and for that matter music - were specific markers that set human beings apart from the rest of creation, have made way for the realisation that, just as other beings are implicated in music, intelligence is a legitimate engineering goal for the construction of machines, and exists in other, non-human selves. Whatever ‘intelligence’ and the creation of sound might be, they no longer figure as unique identifiers of humanity. We are already in a situation where the technologies we use to make music are networked, self-regulating, positioned and perceptive. The idea of the digital computer as a ‘workstation’ or instrument has given way to a new reality where computers are actually points of connection within a network of social relationships and contingent information. Moreover, they inevitably engage with the space of production, that is the liminal arena of plans of social action. Reid describes his “a priori condition of our experience” as being effected by some sort of “magic” - and he uses that word. But the philosopher Suan Stuart makes a good case for this magic being simply the awareness of an arena for plans of action: what she calls kinaesthesia. To make this more concrete to the current discussion, I am now going to tell you a little about the Sonikebana installation by my Edinburgh colleague, Martin Parker, which I witnessed recently.

Sonikebana consists of a number of boxes of various sizes and on wheels, situated in a large, open space. Each box contains a RaspberryPi single-board-computer running sound synthesis and control algorithms, connected to a high-quality loudspeaker playing through holes in the box. Everything is battery-powered. Each unit comprises a GPS location system, and communicates both with a central communications hub and with the other units. This system thus provides three layers of interactional, sonic improvisation: at one level, the units generate sound according to the process currently in operation. Each unit may also receive additional parameter information from the central hub, which may or may not be operated by a human. However, these process parameters are subject to interference from the individual location of each unit. Since the units are moveable, audience
members can - and do, particularly if they are under the age of sixteen - move the units around. This effects continuous control of some parameter settings according to the GPS tracking. Lastly, the units pass information between themselves, including their relative positions, giving the whole system a liveness and agency that is clearly and transparently attributable to the sum of its parts, including its human participants. Can we consider each of the elements of this system to be participating, in Reid’s terms, in ‘social intercourse with some other intelligent being who bears a part …’?

The Sonikebana boxes certainly demonstrate some social roles: they invite engagement, and their response to that engagement is not trivial. In other words, a change in position will have an effect, but the effect may not be immediately apparent. This invites further engagement, since the sonic response requires additional context in order to make it comprehensible. This gives the interaction a certain conversation-like quality, even though each side of the conversation is undertaken from a different basis of response: sound on the one hand, movement on the other. The GPS tracking also allows each box, within its own terms, to become aware of its spatial environment. As Susan Stewart argues (Stuart 2010) the notion of consciousness implies “kinaesthetic imagination”, that is, a sense of space within which movement may be envisaged. Although the boxes have no access to machine-learning algorithms, their trajectories effect a sort of distributed knowledge across the machine/human amalgam, that allows the space to be inhabited rather than merely filled with sound. This positional character of the installation is reminiscent of and perhaps analogous to the notion of positionality in speech-act theory.

In their discussion of ‘The Discursive Production of Selves’, Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) take a Reidian approach to inter-subjectivity, in that they maintain a process of co-construction within speech-acts. Thus, “The social meaning of what has been said will be shown to depend upon the positioning of interlocutors which is itself a product of the social force a conversation action is taken ‘to have’.” In other words, utterances do not just stem from the performance of an action, but also from the reality of a social position which the utterance itself helps to construct, through the understanding of the other participants. I am pushing this conversation paradigm not just because of John Oswald’s characterisation of music
improvisation as polyphonic conversation, but because I want to test Reid’s notion of ‘social operation’ against our experience of music improvisation.

In her Introduction to an issue of the journal Contemporary Music Review dedicated to Music, Mediation Theories, and Actor Network Theory, Georgina Born, with her co-writer Andrew Barry, explores the way that music arises out of “sound … embodied practices, discursive exegeses and interpretations, visual inscriptions, material devices and interfaces, commodity forms, physical location, venue, site or space, socialites and social relations, imagined communities and so on.” (2018) This invokes the now familiar rhetoric of assemblage and hybrid mixture proposed by Bruno Latour and others. However, these assemblages seem to position things and social relations as simply elements of the mix. My Reidian argument here would propose a slightly different analysis: when Harré maintains that “The social meaning of what has been said will be shown to depend upon the positioning of interlocutors which is itself a product of the social force a conversation action is taken ‘to have’”, I take ‘interlocutors to be any element concerned with the production of expression. In Sonikebana, the mobile boxes develop relationships, between themselves and with the other actors in the space, including human listeners. What happens, in improvised music, is co-constructed, not a mixture of social relations between humans, and technological affordances of material objects - I am trying to argue that all of this is in some way really social. In their discussion of intersubjectivity, psychodynamics, neurobiology and the self, Massimo Ammaniti and Vittorio Gallese put it like this:

What distinguishes these relations is not their object but the relation style, or to put it in more technical words, the epistemic status adopted by the I. One can relate to another human being in the same way as one relates to inanimate objects. Similarly, one can relate to inanimate objects like a landscape, a tree, or a work of art, like relating to another human being. (Ammaniti and Gallese 2014, 7)

Thus, to pursue Harrés analysis in our consideration of Sonikebana, people and boxes take ‘positions’ in the discourse: sometimes the box will make sounds that entrance a listener, and they will leave it alone; sometimes the box will be less interesting, and it will get moved or prodded; sometimes the
sound from a box will respond to another box and the attention of the human will shift. This is productive of shifting, social relationships that can include all the elements of Latour’s assemblages, but within the social. One can even include the ethical position of these boxes, whose computer boards are constructed in factories we would not want to work in, or even visit, and which are made from metals and minerals mined in places we probably could not visit.

The final part of my discussion concerns Reid’s notion of “social intercourse”. It is critical to his argument that all the actors in the social network participate equally and knowingly: “(social operations) cannot exist without being expressed by words or signs, and known to the other party.” I have tried, in my discussion of Sonikebana, to put up a case for the material elements of the installation as in some sense ‘knowing’, and this sits in contemporary discourses around the nature and possible locations of intelligence. But there is another aspect to music which makes the ‘conversation’ paradigm a tricky one. Vladimir Jankélévitch, in his book *Music and the Ineffable* begins by placing music in a curious space, similar but not identical to that of Reid’s ‘social operations’. He writes,

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One doesn’t ‘listen to’ a pianist playing before his public … in the same way that one ‘listens to’ a lecturer speaking to his audience, because for the lecturer the listener is the second person – ‘you’, the object of invocation or allocution – whereas the listener is the third person, the outsider, for the pianist sitting at the piano. (Jankélévitch 2003, 21)
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This puts a question-mark over music’s co-construction. If we imagine it as a conversation, who is the other party, if it is not addressed directly to a listener? In an earlier paper about listening, I suggested, perhaps provocatively, that if we now understand ourselves to exist within an ecosystem, that is characterised as the sort of assemblage we have just been considering, perhaps it is the ecosystem itself that we are addressing - as the conversational partner - and consequently it is the ecosystem that is listening to us. What would it mean to think that we address and are listened to by the world around us, as a Reidian co-constructor of social operations, where the ecosystem is itself regarded as social? Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar consider this possibility in their discussion of opera, where music is presented as an
appeal to the gods:

… music acts as an appeal to the Other, as the best means and the best strategy for attaining mercy, softening the Other’s heart, bending the Other’s resistance. … Mercy is ambiguous …: it is nothing but the positive, reverse side of another form of the Other, both more familiar and more terrifying - the Other’s whim and caprice. (Žižek and Dolar 2002, 10/23)

In a time when young people are rebelling against our institutional and habitual approaches to the world around us, when our instrumental and extractionist agendas have shown themselves to be unsustainable, and when the certainty of our own access to a unique intelligence is in question, perhaps it is time to notice more clearly: the full extent of our social operations, within which our music is co-created, and to whom it is addressed.

Bibliography


