

Four Small LLEAPPs for Electroacoustic Music Studies: Notes on performance strategies from a series of participatory electronic music workshops

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Abstract

This paper will consider the conference theme of ‘Electroacoustic Music Beyond Concert Performance’ through the lens of a UK-based participatory electronic workshop for postgraduates and early career researchers that I have been involved in organising since 2009. These events go under the banner of ‘LLEAPP’ (there is cheerful fluidity about what the letters stand for, but at the last discussion it was Laboratory for Live Electronic Audio Performance Practice) and have been held four times in total: twice at the University of Edinburgh (2009, 2013), the University of Newcastle (2010) and the University of East Anglia (2011), with participants from a range of UK and European universities. Whilst the format has tended to shift slightly from event to event, the focus in each case has been on participants coming together and devising some performable music over the course of two or three days, as a basis for reflective practice-led research.

Introduction

What is the place of live electronic music research in the wider endeavour of musical research? How are its knowledge claims established, and to whom – and how – are they communicated? What is the scope of these claims? Where are the borders of our enquiry? How do ‘practice’ and ‘research’ relate? Who is doing this research? Why?

These are not questions, it seems to me (as a live electronics researcher and teacher), that the sub-discipline currently has adequate responses to, at least at a formal level. I am going to argue, however, that not only is there value in confronting them collectively, but also a degree of urgency. To that end, having sketched out my reasons for why I believe this to be acutely problematic, I shall turn my attention to the more productive issue of how ‘we’ (the sub-discipline) might apply ourselves to responding to them.

I shall do this by framing a series of collaborative workshops (‘LLEAPP’), run since 2009, as possibly holding the germ of an idiosyncratically practice-led way that the field of live EA can start to confront these questions.

Miserablist?

Why such despondency? Is the landscape of live electronic research not in good shape? Lowering hardware costs and a proliferation of available software surely lower barriers to practical participation. The slow but steady dissolution of received musical hierarchies – of high/low art; of composers, performers and listeners – surely enlarges the cultural horizon of music departments and makes for a research community that addresses a more fully the scope of electronic music as practised. The extent to which electronic music affects the practice and aesthetics of putatively non-electronic contemporary musical practice, and the growth of conferences like NIME surely indicate the relevance of performed electronic music to a wider community, both within and outwith universities.

Potential 1: Cultural Horizons

Well, yes. Perhaps. However, it would be a mistake to think that these developments require no active response in order for live electronics to fulfil this apparent potential. For instance, whilst it may be true that the range of musical backgrounds present in the institution has increased, particularly at postgraduate level, this presents a set of practical challenges: the almost exclusive focus historical on high electroacoustic art casts a long shadow, and students may well get the impression that as the canonical literature to which they are directed has nothing much to say outside of a particular tradition, then – however much we protest to the contrary – explanation in terms of that tradition is how they are required to conceive of and legitimate their practices in the institutional context. Whilst, optimistically, we might see opportunities here for productive hybridisation where our existing theories are tested against and adapted for new musical contexts, my experience has been that this rarely happens. More frequently what seems to happen is students contorting to squeeze their practice into an unaccommodating box.

So, a practical challenge presents itself: given the evident *potential* for developing our disciplinary knowledge of live electronic practices historically outwith our focus, how do we actually enact this rather than reproducing the institutional priorities we claim to have laid to rest?

On a similar basis, musical practice-led researchers are well placed to contribute significantly to musical scholarship's understanding of the variety of contemporary performance practices, on the basis of our own diverse experiences. As it stands, our formal frameworks for navigating this terrain are surprisingly coarse-grained. What sense does it make to speak of 'the' concert, for instance, given the variation in venues, behaviours, technical infrastructure, production values and forms of professional engagement that are evident? Anecdotally, it seems that a good number of my fellow early-career colleagues do as I do, and enjoy a rich variety of forms of musical engagement outwith the university setting (possibly as a supplement the sparsity and precarity of casual academic employment). So, among our community of researchers are people that are also DJs, community musicians, sound designers, engineers, private teachers, 'straight' musicians and so on. Again, a rich source of untapped potential.

Potential 2: Scholarly Discourse

Even if the sub-discipline could be argued to be fulfilling its rich potential for understanding contemporary electronic practices, there remains the question of whether we are fulfilling our potential for letting our other academic colleagues know this. The place of practice-led researchers with musical scholarship seems somewhat unsettled. Even though practitioners (composers, at least) have enjoyed a long history as researchers, relative to other art-forms, the recent growth of interest in practice-led (or -based or -as) research doesn't seem to have yet brought with it much clarity about the type of contribution to musical scholarship that such approaches are poised to make.

Similarly, and more specifically to live electronics, there is the question of how practitioner-researchers relate to the rapidly growing body of literature around New Instruments for Musical Expression (NIME). There are, in principle, opportunities here for a richly agonistic interdisciplinary discussion about approaches to instrument design and conceptions of musical expression (or, indeed, musicality). However, the absence of a confident consensus from live electronics researchers about what the sub-discipline could contribute that is distinct from the practices of, say, human computer interaction specialists leaves both NIME and our sub-discipline poorer.

Getting a Move On

So, then, I'm proposing that we're not communicating as well as we could with our fellow researchers (a general challenge for practice-led research, I feel) nor particularly well with each other. The field is atomised, exhibiting a delightful breadth of approaches and interests but a dearth of shared understanding or sense of direction.

What's the problem? Is this not in keeping with the contemporary Western conception of the artist as an expresser of their individual voice? It may well be, but such a conception is itself worthy of pointed critique: are we to assume that such individual voices somehow exist prior to, or transcendent of, culture? Moreover, even if this were the case for the Platonic 'pure' artist it is wholly unsatisfactory from the point of view of scholarly (rather than private) research, which is a foundationally collaborative venture.

The sense of urgency in addressing this arises because we find ourselves at a critical point with respect to the role of artistic practice in research. On the one hand there has blossomed a literature around practice-led research in recent years [see for instance], which suggests a hospitable epistemological environment in which to work on questions of where our knowledge claims might lie, who might be interested and how they might like to hear about it. On the other hand, the same can most emphatically not be said of the policy environment (at least in the UK), which is favouring ever more instrumentality and is increasingly driven by a narrowing conception of 'outcomes', and fermenting an destructive management culture in universities (Lorenz, 2012).

Now, I suggest, is not a good moment to be an atomised field with little sense of its place in wider scholarship, poor communications with its nearest neighbours and that is falling short of its potential. Rather, it *would* be a good moment to get some idea of who we are, what we do and why we think we're doing it, and to become adept at communicating this loudly, clearly and firmly.

The Scope of Practice-Led Methods

Part of our difficulty lies in establishing a manageable vocabulary for discussing the scope and knowledge claims of our research, and their relationship to practices given the enormous spread of things that people do. For some, outcomes may unproblematically be framed in terms of Works, for others it may be instruments / systems, for others still it may be some unstable assemblage of these and others (Wilkie *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, if we wish for our research to make any but the most local kind of sense, there is a need to be able to account for and reflect upon our social, cultural and historical location as researchers, if only to make plain our background assumptions to colleagues.

A helpful high-level map of the terrain of musical research is provided by Born (2010) who provides us with four topics: sociality, temporality, technology and ontology. Sociality and temporality are each divided into four planes (resp. scales), from the most local / immediate up to the most macro, although Born is pains to stress the irreducibility of these grosser planes into the smaller. Besides Born's framework being highly useful for demonstrating a need for methodological pluralism in music scholarship, it also helps us as practice-led researchers to make a start on expressing the likely reach of what we are best placed to comment upon. For instance, we should have much of direct value to offer in terms of the first two social planes: the micro-socialities of and the 'imagined communities' around particular musical acts, as we are directly involved and implicated in how these are enacted. Meanwhile, we may be more limited in our ability to contribute to study of the wider social planes, save to comment reflectively on how these contribute to formation of our practical environments. We could say much the same about temporality as a topic: we are well placed to make novel contributions *vis-a-vis* those aspects that our practice engages directly, and to offer reflection on how the slower sweeps (genre, epoch) make themselves present.

Technology as a topic is obviously no stranger to electroacoustic discourse. In common with Waters (2007), it seems to me that we all too frequently take refuge in talking technology to dodge the knottier problems in the field. However, we should approach Born's treatment as an invitation to consider this topic *in interaction* with the other three. Indeed, we are very placed to reflect fruitfully upon our technological interactions as being historically and socially situated, and so to offer a useful expansion to the more abstracted considerations of colleagues in technical disciplines.

Finally, the topic of ontology. Born raises two highly useful points here. First, to insist on the necessity of musical scholarship allow for ontological pluralism (i.e. conceptions of what music is) and, second, for researchers to be aware of the ontological dispositions of their own that they bring to their research. However, it also raises a number of further issues for us as practitioner researchers. Chief among these is that it invites us – in combination with the other topics – to try and grapple more thoroughly with the difficult but pressing questions of how issues of 'context' (society and all that) relate to 'the music itself'. That is, to develop *situated*, critical aesthetic accounts of our work and milieu that are socially and historically aware, and alert to their own contingency.

In short: practice-led approaches are destined to be restricted in the scope of what they can say (historically, socially, bodily) and so, inevitably, partial. However, by way of compensation, they present a chance to study these four topics at their lived intersection,

which can present productively new understandings. Furthermore, it may be that aggregations of such partial accounts could still be of general value to the wider scholarly community.

Co-Practice as collective inquiry

Clearly, the account above is a sketch and a great deal of work is required to develop a more richly shaded impression of the terrain. In line with both the emphasis on collectivity and the focus on practice that I have presented, I suggest that it is worthwhile to consider the utility of *co-practice* (that is, playing together) as part of the field's scholarly communication, and as one possible way of collectively addressing the state of the discipline. This may seem strange, so I will attempt to explain myself.

Consider how little time, as a (admittedly quite diffuse) community, we spend playing together. We play with in each other in self-selected groups, and we play at each other in concerts. However, for many of us, we encounter and learn about each other mostly through spoken presentation or print. As musicians, this seems a little perverse. After all, it is perfectly routine for musicians simply to play together as way of becoming, and staying, acquainted and, indeed, there are things to be learnt this way that would be unlikely to come across otherwise. As practice-led researchers, perhaps it also a little perverse: given the centrality we claim for the practice of such a historically collective and communicative art-form in our scholarship, why leave it absent from the formal ways in which we gather and learn?

So, the first aspect to this is just the reasonably modest suggestion that more playing together, normalised as one of a range of ways of communicating, could go some way towards addressing the atomisation of the discipline. We would learn more and different things about each other's musical priorities, techniques, languages than by speaking or writing alone.

However, further than this – wearing our 'researcher' as well as our 'musician' hats – I am suggesting that episodes of collective playing and reflecting would be a useful way in which to confront broader disciplinary issues. To do so requires something more than just the simple act of playing for its own sake. It means developing techniques for being able to collectively reflect upon and articulate our experiences in terms of research priorities and being able to engage critically with the slippery dialectic between 'process' and 'product'. In this way, the sub-discipline can establish a shared basis for approaching questions both more immediate – such as the terrain of possibilities for different modes of public performance and the types of 'interpretative game' (Shusterman, 2002) we think these might involve – and less, such as establishing some sense of what the 'big issues' in the field are and how we establish our knowledge claims.

As is perhaps evident, this idea owes a debt to the 'workshop approach' described by Landy (1994, pp.107-122), who makes similar points about the role of collective playing in music education, and musicking more generally. What is critical, however, is that in applying the idea to the activity of communication between researchers especial attention needs to be paid to tactics and strategies for developing these shared insights into our discipline and its place in academe.

LLEAPP: Some First Steps

In this final section, I shall introduce some first tentative steps in this direction through a set of workshops called LLEAPP¹ that I have been involved in launching and organising. The first of these, organised by Lauren Hayes, Jules Rawlinson, Sean Williams and myself, took place at the University of Edinburgh in 2009, and involved fellow researchers (all then PhD candidates) from SARC, Newcastle (UK) and the University of East Anglia. Subsequent gatherings were at Newcastle (2010)², UEA (2011)³, and again in Edinburgh (2013). I shall focus most on the 2011 and 2013 events, where a number of interesting changes were made to the format, but first some more general explanation.

Our original impulse for LLEAPP was a recognition of the value a workshop approach might have for engaging the challenges for collaborative electronic music making presented by constantly mutating instrumentation and diverse musical languages. The idea was that the workshops would be ‘self-organising’ to the extent possible: that participants would form into groups based on shared interest and work together for a few days devising a public performance piece (usually, it seemed, of ~20’ duration). Each event has involved between 11-14 participants⁴, featuring a mixture of past and first-time attendees.

Hop, Skip, Jump

The 2009-2011 LLEAPPs all followed a similar pattern insofar as small breakout groups would form (4-6 people), work together and present at a showcase style concert at the end of the event. Whilst in 2009 and 2010 these groups stayed together, and quite compartmentalised for the whole duration, at UEA in 2011 there was more fluidity, with some new *ad hoc* groupings springing up over the course of the workshop to pursue particular ideas.

A more profound addition to the 2011 LLEAPP was that the organisers decided to hold two public showcases in different venues. The first was a ‘standard’ sit-down-and-be-quiet concert in the UEA performance space, the second a less formal affair in the bar of Norwich Arts Centre. Although performing ostensibly the same material each night, this addition gave the participants a chance to see how their material fared in quite different performance situations.

2011: Trading Places

Quite aside from the different acoustic affordances of each space, the less formal gig was clearly a different sort of public affair to the university concert: many of the people passing through were at the centre for a commercial gig in the main auditorium so their engagement couldn’t be taken for granted. It is interesting to observe the kinds of effect this had; some participants were, for instance, more troubled than others that a respectful hush could not be guaranteed. In my particular case, a collaboration with Bill Vine and Jason Dixon – ‘The Jason Dixon Line’ – that had been quite a delicate, introspective affair in the concert hall took

¹ What the letters in LLEAPP stand for is deliberately fluid. Most recently (2013) it was ‘Laboratory for Live Electronic Audio Performance Practice’. Some documentation of the workshops can be found at <http://lleapp.blogspot.co.uk/> (last accessed 09/14), work is currently under-way to form a more comprehensive and citable collection at the University of Edinburgh’s data repository.

² Organised by Adam Parkinson and Nick Williams. I missed this event due to a performance commitment.

³ Organised by Ed Perkins and Bill Vine.

⁴ See <http://lleapp.blogspot.co.uk/p/participants.html> (last accessed 09/14) for a full list of participants at each LLEAPP.

on more of a physical theatre character in this different social context, ending with three of us (plus a bonus guest) attempting to simultaneously play a single cardboard box with bows.

2013: A Different Tack

When LLEAPP returned to Edinburgh in 2013, we introduced some more drastic changes. These were partly informed by a concern with *product*: that the breakout groups and showcase approach wasn't producing a whole *event* that had an engaging arc to it. But a concern with process was also at work, in that whilst individual groups might bond quite tightly with the breakout mechanism, the groups remained quite isolated despite attempts to build in crit sessions and similar. Also, it was felt that the desired self-organisation had never really been as successful as hoped: turning up and forming working partnerships on the basis of brief verbal introductions (and, only-ever-notional online introductions prior to events) seemed to be too much to expect.

The most significant change, then, was to abandon the breakout groups and keep the whole group (in this case 14 people) working together in the same space, which was also the performance venue, for the whole duration, with the plan being to work together towards a single longer performance. Second, we dispensed with slightly awkward verbal icebreaker sessions at the start and simply replaced it with an additional gig. Participants were offered the chance to showcase some of their work and / or join with some spontaneous groupings as an opportunity to become musically interested. Interestingly, everyone went for the latter.

Finally, in recognition that it might be a tall order 14 musicians self-organising an engaging, extended performance in a couple of days, we brought someone⁵ in to sit outside the group but to attend to maintaining momentum and to making the longer duration work. Although referred to as a 'musical director' the actual role turned out to be less directorial and more facilitatory / participatory.

This addition of someone 'outside' but still intimately involved turned out to be the most significant, both in terms of musical and procedural outcomes. With the aid of our MD we were able to produce a far more engaging performance by spreading ourselves throughout the performance space, rather than clustering behind a notional proscenium arch, and devising tactics for establishing spontaneous musical groupings, such that the music (and its spatial spread) would keep developing. Audience members (and players!) were then at liberty to explore this space however they wished over the course of the performance. The consensus among participants was that this was the first LLEAPP where we felt we had developed a specific musical idea worth pursuing together in the future.

Procedurally, the MD turned out to be crucial as well. Most fundamentally, they were able to ensure that the greatest amount of time was spent productively (i.e. playing) and that we didn't get bogged down in either technical or aesthetic details. Importantly, this also made it easier for we players to be reflexively aware of our situation, and our role in the group, which is crucial from the perspective of engaging with this as researchers.

⁵ The very forbearing Jan Hendriscke.

A Basis for Communicative Co-Practice?

The way that LLEAPP has taken shape exhibits much of promise for the kind of communicative co-practice discussed above. Certainly, a workable basis has been established for gathering diverse live electronic musicians and getting them playing in a committed and focused way, and for fostering a degree of reflection from participants in the process. Much work remains to be done, however, in developing workable tactics for effective reflection on the scholarly aspects of this.

First, the (verbal) discursive process has not yet been made to work as well as the musical one. It remains hard to have group discussions and crits to which everyone feels both enthusiastic and allowed to participate. This is not altogether surprising: some musicians feel altogether uncomfortable discussing their practice (although I would insist that being willing and able to do is crucial from a scholarly practice) and even for those that are comfortable, it can be difficult to bring together and articulate useful thoughts about practical experiences in a short time. So, one important strand of future work lies in discovering practical mechanisms to ease this transition, possibly by approaching the verbal discussion in the same workshop spirit as the music making.

Second, the role of the public performance warrants further examination. Is it useful? Is it necessary for producing the needed concentration and focus in playing? My concern is that it can skew attention disproportionately towards a concern with the musical outcome at the expense of engaging with the more challenging reflective activities that I see as crucial to the research enterprise.

Following on, a third issue is the episodic nature of these events so far, framed as they are by their concluding performances. Clearly, most musical partnerships have more than 2-3 days to gestate, and it would seem that both musical outcomes and reflective insights could be improved further with longer time-term collaborations. The most obvious barrier here is, unfortunately, money.

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