

## **'The voice that calls the hand to write: exploring the adventure of agency and authorship within collaborative partnerships'**

How do we imagine 'the voice' when I say 'the voice that calls the hand to write'? What sort of creative scenario do you have in your head now? Is the voice the inner voice or does it belong to another body? Does it 'call' in spoken words or sung melodies? And whose is the hand? How does the hand respond to the call of the voice?

In the past 10-15 years there has been a proliferation of research into collaboration, and particularly into collaboration between a composer and a performer. In the first part of this presentation I want to unpick a bit what we mean by 'collaboration', what its identifying features might be and what forms it might take, and why we might think we want it as part of our practice, or not; throughout, I will be drawing on my own experience as well as referencing the research of various other musicians, both performers and composers, who have contributed to the growing body of research in this area. In the second part, I will talk about my work as a singer with two composers — two composer-performer relationships that, whilst quite different from one another, I feel can justly be described as collaborative. Here I want to look at how we negotiate agency and authorship, technique and vulnerability, and also share some short extracts of music; I'll then offer some concluding reflections.

### **PART I**

#### **Why are we suddenly talking about collaboration?**

Why this proliferation of research into collaboration, and why the sudden ubiquity of the word? I confess I wasn't aware, until I wrote this presentation earlier in the year, that the word was being explored as much as it is within an academic context, but I have for a while been a little perplexed, not to say uneasy, with the way I see it being thrown around in the new music scene.

Language is subject to fashion, like anything else, and I suspect this word is ubiquitous at this moment for a few reasons. Firstly, it implies a bracketing together of creative forces, which serves very nicely our current taste for multi-disciplinarity and plurality within the arts; second, it is gender-neutral and non-hierarchical, and so suggests that, maybe, we've moved on from loaded terms such as 'muse'; third, maybe its fuzziness and vagueness as a term is useful in promotion terms — it promises a lot but nobody really holds it to account. More optimistically, though, perhaps its widespread use points to a general shift away from individualism and towards social consciousness, lessening the 'I' for the sake of the 'we'.

I have certainly noticed that the word is rife within arts-establishment jargon, or 'funding speak'; others, too, have queried 'the valorisation of collaboration as an

ideology'<sup>1</sup>. Artists are under huge pressure now to prove *impact* and *engagement*: the quality of the resultant work is no longer enough. Apparently, one way to demonstrate greater impact and engagement is through collaboration. As John Croft writes:

'Why this obsession with collaboration? One reason is surely the unquestioning adoption of business ideology within academia... Another is perhaps the widespread assimilation of composition to the 'research' model: it is thus assumed to benefit from collaborating with other 'practitioners'.<sup>2</sup>

Or, in the words of clarinettist Heather Roche:

'The word 'collaboration' has become a 'buzz-word' in the music business for any contemporary music ensemble (or individual, for that matter) wishing to market itself appropriately.'<sup>3</sup>

To test this theory, I went to the website of the PRS for Music Foundation and entered 'collaboration' into their search tool. The result was 32 pages of statements using this word in the context of descriptions of projects the foundation has funded, artist biographies, funding strands or news bulletins. That's about 320 entries using this word — and that's without searching for 'collaborative' or 'collaborating'!

I suspect that a combination of fashion and ever-scarcer funding has led to the bandying around of words such as 'collaboration'. Perhaps this explains the proliferation of research into collaborative practices — are people partly just trying to investigate the actual currency of the word and of the practice?

### **How do we define 'collaboration'?**

In her 2011 doctoral thesis, 'Dialogue and Collaboration in the Creation of New Works for Clarinet', Heather Roche defines collaboration as: 'a creative practice that engages with the work and the relationship between collaborators in order to create.'<sup>4</sup> She goes on to say that 'The definition emphasizes the process of creation, rather than the product it results in.'

Australian pianist Zubin Kanga writes in his doctoral thesis, 'Inside the Collaborative Process: Realising New Works for Piano', that it requires:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor. 'Collaboration and the Composer: case studies from the end of the 20th century'. *TEMPO*, Vol. x, Issue 240, page 38.

<sup>2</sup> John Croft. 'On Working Alone' in Clarke & Doffman (eds) *Creativity, Improvisation and Collaboration*. OUP 2018, page 199.

<sup>3</sup> Heather Roche. *Dialogue and Collaboration in the Creation of New Works for Clarinet*. University of Huddersfield 2011, page 22.

<sup>4</sup> Roche *ibid.* page 11.

*'integratively collaborative relationships, where close dialogue and creative exchanges were found throughout the composition process'*<sup>5</sup>.

Though I object to the tautological structure of both these definitions, what emerges here is that we struggle to define 'collaboration' without identifying its features and its forms.

### **What are its features?**

One of the earlier research papers on the topic was written by two composers, Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor. In their article from 2007, 'Collaboration and the Composer: case studies from the end of the 20th century'<sup>6</sup>, they identify two key features between the collaborating parties as:

- a close personal relationship;
- shared aesthetic mission.

(Interestingly, they later conclude that 'an artistic collaboration [does] not have to be democratic to be successful'.)

According to Heather Roche, the hallmarks of a good collaboration are:

- talking and listening;
- playfulness;
- collaborative space;
- trust.

The quality of the physical, intellectual and emotional space shared by the collaborating parties is one feature that crops up again and again. Roche describes it as the framework:

*'Ideally, this space focuses on the development of a work through dialogue. A space that encourages the emergence of creative ideas, pushing the development of the friendship, pushing the development of the performer and the development of the composer.'*<sup>7</sup>

In Luke Nickel's article, published in *TEMPO*, on the collaborative practices shared by composer Éliane Radigue and the performers of her series *Occam Ocean*, a more holistic quality of space is considered:

*'performers [...] enter Radigue's personal space and adopt her schedule. Radigue's collaborators engage in niceties such as a 'cup of tea, always a cup of tea, and a bit of discussion'*<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Zubin Kanga. 'Inside composer-performer collaboration'. *Resonate Magazine*, 15 May 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Hayden & Windsor *ibid.* page 39.

<sup>7</sup> Roche *ibid.* page 15.

<sup>8</sup> Luke Nickel. 'Occam Notions: Collaboration and the performer's perspective in Éliane Radigue's *Occam Ocean*.' *TEMPO*, Vol. 70, Issue 275, page 33.

Here we understand that it is the sharing of ‘personal space’ and the social ‘niceties’ that pave the way for talking and listening, playfulness and trust — the personal relationship precedes, or at the very least develops alongside, the development of musical material.

We find ourselves talking a lot more, then, about the quality of the *relationship* between the collaborators than about the precise nature of the *practice* they develop together, or indeed about the nature or quality of what they *produce* together. Two other features of this relationship that seem important to me are ‘vulnerability’ and ‘mutual dependency’.

‘Vulnerability’ encapsulates the crucial process of opening up to one another’s practices, ideas and fears, and of risking the implications of a properly shared space. This has been a hallmark of my own collaborative relationships; it surprised me, then, to hear Sam Hayden use these words about his process of composing alone: ‘I conceive of the compositional process itself as something fleeting, vulnerable, fragile’<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps the distinguishing feature of vulnerability within collaboration is that it is *shared*, and is recognised as a useful part of the creative process.

‘Mutual dependency’ implies that both — or all — parties are necessary to the process in some way whilst allowing for their roles and inputs to be quite distinct. Speaking about a particularly fruitful collaboration, Hayden writes that ‘Everyone is dependent on everyone else to produce sound resulting in a truly collaborative situation.’<sup>10</sup>

With all this in mind, I would define collaboration as ‘a shared practice that intentionally cultivates an intimate creative space (physical, intellectual and emotional) and produces a distinctive body of work’. The word ‘intentional’ is important here: though projects might fail to be collaborative, projects rarely become collaborative unexpectedly part-way through the process; they require a unanimity of intent from the outset. I would say that common features of a healthy collaboration are:

- a shared aesthetic mission;
- a non-hierarchical structure;
- mutual dependence;
- a dialogue-rich process;
- shared vulnerability.

I might go further and stipulate that true collaboration is ‘long-term’: after all, these features have to be built up over time.

### **What a collaboration is not (an aside)**

---

<sup>9</sup> Hayden & Windsor *ibid.* page 35.

<sup>10</sup> Hayden & Windsor *ibid.* page 36.

It may be just as well, at this point, to state that not all creative partnerships are collaborations. Though the terminology varies, many authors attempt to map out the various forms of creative partnership, from less (or not at all) collaborative to more. Hayden and Windsor offer us:

- directive - interactive - collaborative;

which maps very closely onto Roche's categories of:

- commission - co-operation - collaboration.<sup>11</sup>

Avoiding any implicit hierarchy, I propose:

- participatory – cooperative – collaborative.

But let me be clear: I think a project or a creative partnership either is or isn't collaborative. Commissioning someone to write for you does not *per se* make the arrangement a collaboration; likewise, an 'interactive' exchange with another artist, whilst a very valid form of creative partnership, is not a collaboration. Collaboration is just one particular, intentional method of stimulating the creative process. It is not better than any other. After all, even an artist working in isolation can be transformed from within and without at every turn, or, as Nigel Thrift puts it:

'Practices are productive concatenations that have been constructed out of all manner of resources and which provide the basic intelligibility of the world.'<sup>12</sup>

Now that we know what it is, and what it is not, **what forms does it take?**

The beauty of collaboration is that it is a unique combination of individuals, each with their own unique practice, and so the form that their collaborative process takes is likely to be idiosyncratic. It's possible that this is part of the great appeal, that through the blurring of roles we are liberated from conforming to type. As Zubin Kanga writes:

'The roles of composer and performer are often dissolved, which makes the concept of creative ownership highly problematic. The cases also confirmed that there is no 'right' way to collaborate — different musical styles and combinations of personalities require different approaches.'<sup>13</sup>

### **Roles within the collaborative partnership**

For the purposes of this presentation I am focusing on composer-performer collaboration, but this is, of course, not the only kind. What interests me is why the time-honoured interaction between a composer and a performer should now require a new label, whether this shift in language responds to an actual shift in process, and whether this shift in process then demands a redefining of our roles.

---

<sup>11</sup> A term Roche borrows from Mary Alm. Roche *ibid.* page 13.

<sup>12</sup> Nigel Thrift (2008) cited in Ben Spatz *What a Body Can Do*. Routledge 2015, page 8.

<sup>13</sup> Kanga *ibid.*

The vast majority of musical works were created in this way: composer composes score; performer performs score. There is, it should be said, a certain efficiency to this model of each person simply carrying out the role for which they are, presumably, best equipped. So, why the sudden dissatisfaction? Why the desire to see our roles blurred? Composer John Croft makes a compelling case against the voguish obsession with collaboration in his intervention entitled 'On Working Alone':

'There is now a widespread assumption that the work of one person can invariably be improved by involving more people, that the very idea of the individual 'creator' has somehow had its day. What has changed? It seems implausible to imagine that a 'workshopped' version of the *Rite of Spring* would have turned out better, or to regret that the *Eroica* wasn't conceived as a collaborative project. But to invoke such examples today in defence of solitary work invites the objection that one is in thrall to something called 'the Romantic idea of the genius'.<sup>14</sup>

Croft goes on to say that 'The crucial point here is not that there is no productive relationship between composer and performer—there most certainly is—but that the relationship is mediated by notation.'<sup>15</sup> I think the role of notation in performer-composer collaboration is key: is it by chance that we're using this term more in classical music as the genre evolves to include more experimental, non-notated practices?

Croft's reference to 'the Romantic idea of the genius' reinforces my idea that this word is a reflection of the times in which we live and think and work. Perhaps we are, finally, shifting away from the Enlightenment reification of the individual and embracing the opportunities of moving beyond self-containment. In her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing mirrors much of the language I have been using when she observes that

'We change through our collaborations both within and across species. The important stuff of life on earth happens in those transformations, not in the decision trees of self-contained individuals.'<sup>16</sup>

Though I maintain that true collaboration is rare and not appropriate for everyone, I am excited by the possibility that part of the proliferation of collaborative endeavours, whether genuine or half-baked, is due to a real need to reimagine our roles and redefine our agency as artists.

The question is: **how ready and able are we to be transformed?**

Tsing, of the mushroom book, cuts right to the heart of the issue when she writes that 'collaboration means working across difference, which leads to

---

<sup>14</sup> Croft *ibid.* page 200.

<sup>15</sup> Croft *ibid.* page 202.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press 2015, page 29.

contamination'<sup>17</sup>. Difference can be challenging, and with transformation comes contamination. One would imagine that any artist entering into a collaborative project would be open to, if not excited about, the possibility for growth. However, Hayden and Windsor point to the idea that collaboration is something of a specialist endeavour:

'Composers may well wish to enter into more collaborative, rather than directive, relationships with performers, for example, or may be urged to collaborate with artists from other media, but to what extent are they prepared to do this by their experiences, and supported in this by their education?'<sup>18</sup>

Robin Hayward, tuba player and collaborator in the Radigue *Occam Ocean* series, also recognises that the traditional roles in new music can block the collaborative flow:

'I often think about it as the head and the body, and how the head and the body interact. So in this case the head is the composer, the body's the performer with the instrument. I think it's much more of a feedback loop. And that's actually something I see as a problem in a lot of new music, that that feedback loop isn't working, or it's a negative feedback loop, it's blocked.'<sup>19</sup>

All the more reason, then, to enter into a collaboration understanding what that means, what it requires and that we are likely to be surprised by the outcome.

### **Why might we want to collaborate?**

My main motivation for collaborating with another artist is this: I want to be *stretched*. And I like the element of surprise that comes from working closely with another person — they can lead me into territory that I might not have imagined. It seems I'm not alone — in the words of composer/improviser Luke Deane: 'I thrilled in having my mind stretched by a collaborator.'<sup>20</sup>

And we hear similar language from pianist Zubin Kanga:

'It's not just the thrill of making history when you walk on stage to premiere a new piece, it is the challenge of innovating new approaches...'<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps we might summarise the reasons *for* collaboration thus:

- to be stretched;

---

<sup>17</sup> Tsing *ibid.* page 28.

<sup>18</sup> Hayden & Windsor *ibid.* page 30.

<sup>19</sup> Nickel *ibid.* page 33.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Zaba & Luke Deane (2017). 'Co-Composition: Radical Collaboration'. *MEAKULTURA*. Available at: <http://meakultura.pl/kosmopolita/co-composition-radical-collaboration-1846> [accessed 17 Feb. 2019].

<sup>21</sup> Zubin Kanga. 'Inside composer-performer collaboration'. *Resonate Magazine*, 15 May 2014.

- to escape the tedium of our own ideas and limitations;
- to share the responsibility of creating something with another person;
- to capitalise on the strategic value (funding, marketing, cultural capital generally).

### **Why might we not want to collaborate?**

It may not suit us. It may simply be irrelevant to the way we work. I love this quote from John Croft:

‘no communication between collaborators approaches the complexity—and potential strangeness—of the hundreds of trillions of synaptic connections inside your own head.’<sup>22</sup>

Or, it may frighten us, because we recognise the compromise that it demands. Hayden and Windsor acknowledge that this can be problematic for the composer:

‘However motivated to enter into collaborations he or she may be, there may be tacit or explicit resistance to the idea of giving up creative control.’<sup>23</sup>

So, we might summarise the reasons *against* collaboration like this:

- it is inefficient (in time, energy or money);
- it is unpredictable;
- it requires a relinquishing of creative control;
- it prioritises process over output.

### **What might prevent a collaboration being collaborative?**

Even with all the right intentions, sometimes the intimate creative space cannot be found. I suspect that most often this is due to a lack of dialogue right at the project’s conception, but sometimes we mislead ourselves as much as we do others. Essentially, an imbalance of any kind can jeopardise the partnership, be it of status, experience, expectation or investment. In my opinion, the most crucial stage of a collaboration comes before it actually starts, in the long conversations that should be had to investigate compatibility and articulate intentions.

## **PART II**

### **My journey into composer-performer collaboration**

After eight years working primarily as a consort singer with my vocal ensemble, EXAUDI, and early music groups in the UK and in Europe, I created my first solo project in 2010, and began commissioning solo repertoire in 2013. I knew I was

<sup>22</sup> Croft *ibid.* page 202.

<sup>23</sup> Hayden & Windsor *ibid.* page 32.



looking for meaningful collaboration quite a while before I found it, and I would say that I had several attempts before it worked. In fact, I would say that of the two most meaningful collaborations I have had with composers to date, one came about quite to my surprise and the other was very intentional from my side.

### **What was I looking for?**

When I started creating projects for myself as a soloist, I was looking for a new challenge. Along with that, I wanted to begin creating a body of repertoire that really fitted me as a singer and as a personality, and to develop stronger muscles as a programmer. In hindsight, I now realise that I saw collaboration as a means to finding my own *agency*. I felt stuck in the traditional role described here by Christopher Small: 'The performer is the servant of the composer and the work, and nothing more.'<sup>24</sup> I felt like a performing monkey, or like a cog in a wheel.

### **Working with Rebecca Saunders**

I started working with Rebecca Saunders in 2015. She had been commissioned by Klangforum Wien to write a new work for soprano and ensemble and, to my surprise and delight, asked to write for me, so I went to Berlin to meet her and sing for her. We had three or four working sessions in her Berlin studio, which began with me singing her snippets of my repertoire and quickly progressed to us experimenting with particular sounds, her turning them over and over and stretching and testing them in my voice. The resulting piece, *Skin*, was premiered at Donaueschingen in October 2016 and to date I have performed it thirteen times. Since then, Rebecca has written four more pieces for voice: some were written for other singers, but I have now performed them all: *Yes*, an eighty-minute piece for soprano and ensemble was premiered by Donatienne Michel-Dansac in 2017; *O*, for solo voice that emerged out of sketches for *Skin* and *Yes*, was premiered by Sarah Maria Sun in 2017; I premiered *O, Yes & I* for voice and bass flute with Helen Bledsoe in 2018; I recently premiered *Nether*, for voice and ensemble. Rebecca and I are currently working on a new piece for voice and electronics, to be premiered in June.

Though Rebecca is a well-established composer and rather ahead of me in terms of artist development, conditions for collaboration were ripe because she had not written much for voice. I think there was a shared openness and vulnerability from the outset. She is also unusual in that she is irrepressibly drawn to the expressive particularities of a voice — this particular voice in this body belonging to this person — and so, whilst her music requires technical consistency she is more drawn to grain than to perfection: this allows room for creating something personal.

I wouldn't say that the way we work blurs the traditional composer/performer roles — she writes and I sing. I may well propose an adjustment to a sound or finesse the way it is notated, but the process of composition is entirely Rebecca's; there's no question over authorship here. However, the shared practice, the

---

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Small (2007), cited Heather Roche *ibid*.

intimate creative space and the body of work that have emerged are deeply collaborative. The result is music that is perfectly tailored to fit me and my voice, and so is empowering and liberating to perform.

[Saunders *Skin* (excerpt) <https://soundcloud.com/julietfraser/saunders-skin-c.3>']

### **Working with Cassandra Miller**

I met Cassandra Miller in 2013 when EXAUDI commissioned *Guide* for eight voices. In 2015 I went to Glasgow for the Tectonics Festival and heard her *Duet for cello and orchestra*. And I was so moved by that that I approached her about writing a solo piece for me for a project in 2017. Supported by a grant from the PRS Foundation and by an Open Space residency at Snape Maltings (which is to say that conditions were ripe for something unhurried and unusual to unfold), we started work at Snape in October 2016. The result was — is — *Tracery*, a modular work for voice and tape that consists of four pieces so far, and is set to grow by several more this coming year.

In 2016, Cassandra's compositional process was shifting, as was my career. I remember that I arrived at our first session together expecting to be given some sketches, but instead she launched into a series of questions! What followed was many long discussions about our careers, about vulnerability, about what matters in music-making, what 'good' means in terms of a piece or a performance, and about how to be one's unguarded self on stage.

Here is a quote from that time which gives you some insight into the way Cassandra was working, and which introduces the process that underpins the *Tracery* modules:

'I'm prioritizing the process of *making* something above working toward the end result. I do tend toward using found material as a starting point (though not exclusively), but instead of my transcription-based ideas (of most my work for the last 5 years or so) I'm doing all sorts of other processes. These have included asking a performer to sing while meditating as a way of generating a creative response to a source material...'

I had never meditated before, but Cassandra introduced me to the principles of a body scan meditation. Whilst Cassandra might say that I 'sing while meditating', I would describe the process more as a strange form of 'automatic singing'<sup>25</sup> — my primary task is to perform a body scan meditation, but incorporated into that meditation is the invitation to trace or respond to vocally and/or physically the source material I hear in my headphones.

Source materials for the first four modules are:

---

<sup>25</sup> I'm thinking of André Breton's term 'pure psychic automatism', practised by the Surrealists especially in the form of automatic writing and automatic drawing.

- two Hardanger fiddle tunes;
- second movement of String Quartet no. 8 by Ben Johnston;
- 'Love und Romance' by The Slits;
- Robert Ashley interviewing Pauline Oliveros.

The process of meditating is extremely intimate. These pieces require a total abandoning of my professional training, a dismantling of any guardedness and an acceptance that some unexpected and sometimes unwanted emotions may suddenly come to the surface. I have found myself sobbing during a meditation more than once, and am often making sounds that I wouldn't describe as 'singing'. The results have been far stranger and far more challenging than either of us anticipated.

[play excerpt of Ben Johnston String Quartet no. 8, 2 mvt, until 0'54

<https://youtu.be/aX3U9xMEaj4>]

[play Vimeo of *Tracery : Lazy, Rocking* <https://vimeo.com/267404968> c. 2'30]

[play beginning of all that dust version c.2']

## PART III

### Reflections

I want to reflect, very briefly, on four words. They have all arisen earlier in the discussion, and I want to pay them some attention now as a way of evaluating my collaborative practices with Rebecca Saunders and Cassandra Miller.

### Agency

I have talked about my quest for agency being a strong motivator for seeking out collaborative partnerships. What has unfolded in my work with Rebecca and Cassandra is, essentially, a shift from an *interpreter* to an *agent* in the process of creating the work. In both cases, the material has emerged because I was there, in that space, with the composer.

In a more strategic sense, my status as a soloist and therefore my *agency* as an artist may have increased thanks to these collaborations. I can't say that this was intentional on my part but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad about it! I recognise that my association with Rebecca fast-tracked my career as a soloist by dramatically increasing my 'institutionalised cultural capital'<sup>26</sup>: *Skin* granted me an introduction to some of the most wonderful ensembles, conductors and festivals, and allowed them to see me as the sort of singer I wanted to be. Woodworker Peter Korn, in his book *Why We Make Things & Why It Matters*, uses beautiful language to describe his own journey towards increased agency:

<sup>26</sup> One of Bourdieu's three types of cultural capital, taken from his essay *The Forms of Capital* (1986).

'to truly assume the identity of a craftsman, I needed to *inform* my social environment so that *others* would see me that way too... To become a craftsman I had to coax the narratives of others down the trail I was blazing. The things I made were emissaries sent out into the world to negotiate on my behalf.'<sup>27</sup>

## Authorship

There seems to be an implied consensus amongst the authors that I have cited that a 'fully' collaborative practice produces a work that is not notated. You may well imagine that I don't agree with this, but it is worth confronting the issue of authorship that inevitably arises within the most 'enmeshed' collaborative practices. Nickel arrives at a nice image for the 'object' that emerges from Radigue's close collaboration with performers:

'Until [~~that~~] possible transmission, the collaborators embody all aspects of an *Occam Ocean* piece within themselves and are, in effect, living scores.'<sup>28</sup>

That particular group of collaborators is finding its own way to answer the questions around authorship and transmission; as ever, dialogue is key. In my work with Rebecca, there is no question that anyone other than she is the author of the works that come out of our working together, but I appreciate that she is always careful to acknowledge my input in the score and in interviews. Cassandra and I have talked a lot about authorship of the *Tracery* modules and have arrived at the consensus that they are 'made' (not written) by us both. We are still figuring out how to articulate this in the context of a CD or when registering the works for royalties, and how we might transmit the pieces to other performers.

## Technique

The vocal techniques employed and discovered in these two collaborations have been very different. Put simply, I sing Rebecca's music with my 'classical' voice, using my *bel canto* technique, and in *Tracery* I try to leave that behind altogether, to sing quietly and 'naturally', as if humming to myself.

Technique is a funny old thing: it is at once a foundation, a collection of habits, a source of freedom and a limitation. Barthes may object that technique can render music 'flattened out into perfection'<sup>29</sup> — and often I agree with him, especially in classical music performance — but technique is never fixed. This, for me, is part of the joy of collaboration, that it leads my technique into new territories. As Ben Spatz writes in *What a Body Can Do*:

---

<sup>27</sup> Peter Korn *Why We Make Things & Why It Matters: The Education of a Craftsman*. Vintage 2017, page 67.

<sup>28</sup> Nickel *ibid.* page 33.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes. 'The Grain of the Voice' in *New Critical Essays*. Hill & Wang, 1980, page ??.

‘We should be wary of declaring things impossible, since technique is never more than an incomplete and unfinished engagement with the affordances of reality’<sup>30</sup>.

Together, Rebecca and I have spent a lot of time unearthing new sounds, then working out how to produce them reliably and how to notate them. This has led not just to an expanded catalogue of extended vocal techniques (a term that I hate, by the way) but to a rethinking of how *bel canto* technique can serve the more experimental and extreme things that I do with my voice.

In contrast, Cassandra and I have talked a lot about the abandonment of singing technique and the sort of ‘show’ that one puts on during performance. These ideas were there from the beginning of the project and have shaped all our decisions, and the use of meditation within our process further encourages this ‘letting go’. I found this abandonment really hard when we started working together, but I’ve been amazed by the impact it has on my state of mind — when I perform *Tracery* as part of a mixed programme, my focus is completely different *because* of the zone I have to be in to meditate. In both collaborations, my experience has been that our shared practice has led me into new understandings of what my technique is and can be.

## **Vulnerability**

I’ve talked quite a bit about vulnerability already, but I think it’s a fundamental ingredient in a fruitful collaboration. It may not come easily at first, and I definitely wouldn’t advocate bearing one’s soul with any old colleague, but encouraging shared vulnerability is a skill one can cultivate, like any other. Further, vulnerability often brings forth compassion — collaborative partners tend to be much gentler with us than we are with ourselves.

I have avoided bringing gender into this presentation until now, but I do find myself wondering what it says that I am doing my most collaborative work with other women. Vulnerability, regrettably, probably isn’t gender-neutral... From my cursory look at the academic literature on collaboration, though, I would conclude that performers and composers of all gender identities are attracted to the creative possibilities of letting down our guard.

## **Concluding thoughts**

Writing this paper has given me a fresh appreciation for the quality — in terms of the process, the resulting works and the personal relationships — of the shared practices I am developing with Rebecca and Cassandra. It has also helped me to clarify the different models of creative interaction and understand why I have been drawn to true collaboration. It’s not that I am not open to a more old-school way of working (I certainly am), but for me that’s now firmly in another category

---

<sup>30</sup> Ben Spatz (2015). *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*. Routledge, page 66.

— the role I play in the ‘composer writes piece for performer’ model is simply less creative for me, less transformational. However, there is a limit to how many collaborative projects I can take on, demanding as they are of time and energy, so I’m happy to embrace a variety of partnerships in a gently shifting balance.

One of my aims in writing this paper is to reclaim for this word a little precision and integrity. Collaboration as a concept does have significant artistic, personal and cultural merit; collaboration as a word does mean something quite precise to most people, when they stop and think about it, but we need to stop using it haphazardly or, worse, manipulatively.

Every collaboration is unique because of the individuals and the particular ‘meshed consciousness’<sup>31</sup> that emerges between them. This means not only that each partnership feels different, but also that some people may well not be a natural fit, collaboratively, and even that some people may simply struggle with the concept of collaboration altogether — that’s OK! There is room for all models. Key to a healthy and fruitful collaboration, I think, is identifying who might make a good collaborator, and identifying, step by step, the fertile ground you can tread together. But we should also prepare to be surprised. Certainly, no-one should undertake collaboration unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, but rather in full consciousness of the vulnerability and hard graft that such a long-term partnership requires.

Whether alone or with others, no matter what the object is that we are crafting, it is good to be reminded that we make to share, and the very act of making matters. I shall close with the words of Peter Korn, the woodworker:

‘both coffee table and manuscript embody questions I asked and the answers at which I arrived during their creation. Being permanent and accessible in a way that thought isn’t, they serve as landmarks for my further exploration. Yet I am not the only possible respondent and reader, nor was I intended to be. My hope from the start has been to participate in a larger conversation by creating something worth sharing... Such is human nature. We are socially embraided to such an extent that the architecture of our thoughts is a communal construction.’<sup>32</sup>

Juliet Fraser, December 2019  
‘Collaborations are more refreshing than new socks’ conference,  
CREATIE, Royal Conservatory of Antwerp

---

<sup>31</sup> Zaba & Deane *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Korn *ibid.* page 63.