

'In the thick of it: further reflections on the mess and the magic of collaborative partnerships'

Nearly two years ago, full of excitement for various collaborative partnerships that were emerging but also frustrated with the ubiquity and imprecision of the word 'collaboration', I wrote a paper entitled 'The voice that calls the hand to write: exploring the adventure of agency and authorship within collaborative partnerships'. Through writing that paper, I found clarity; however, my feelings about collaboration became more complex, and each time I came to present it, I felt I needed to amend certain points or distance myself from some of my ideas. So, when in 2020 I found myself embroiled in several collaborative projects, I took a deep breath and decided it was time to write something new.

I am truly in the thick of it. Of the collaborative partnerships that inspired me to write the first paper some continue to bear fruit whilst others have run their course and, meanwhile, new ones have emerged, each confounding expectations. This strikes me as appropriate, because the process of building each collaborative practice is risky and the results are unpredictable. I'm picking up here roughly where I left off in the final version, from December 2019, of my earlier paper. But if the first was a paper, this is an essay: where the first focused on composer-performer collaboration and was grounded in academic literature, this is coloured by a much more eccentric bibliography and gives vent to a more subjective approach. Once again, though, case studies play a role because all this thinking and writing is fuelled by the need to understand the lived experience.

This essay was started in August 2020 and is being completed in January 2021. I will largely avoid talking about the pandemic but it is the undeniable backdrop. It is the reason that I have had the time to let my thoughts sprawl and my reading meander, and the precarity of the future has, I suspect, contributed to a certain degree of navel gazing and 'fuck-it-ness' when considering what I want for my own practice and from future collaborations. I offer the earlier paper and this essay as a footnote to my creative practice and as a personal meditation on the inevitable mess and potential magic of collaboration.

PART I CONTAMINATED ENTANGLEMENTS

Whilst I want to avoid covering old ground, it might be useful to recapitulate what we mean when we talk about 'collaboration' between a composer and a performer. In my earlier paper I proposed that collaboration was:

a shared practice that intentionally cultivates an intimate creative space (physical, intellectual and emotional) and produces a distinctive body of work.¹

I observed that:

¹ Juliet Fraser, 'The voice that calls the hand to write: exploring the adventure of agency and authorship within collaborative partnerships' (2019), p. 4.

common features of a healthy collaboration are a shared aesthetic mission, a non-hierarchical structure, mutual dependence, a dialogue-rich process, [and a] shared vulnerability²

and that these features have to be built up over time. I concluded that there was a sliding scale of creative engagement upon which 'participation' might represent the least enmeshed and 'collaboration' the most, and I advocated for its judicious use as a term. It strikes me now that one crucial word is missing: transformation. Leaving aside the misguided fools who might pursue collaboration as a means of leveraging funding or gaining a status bump through association, the most common motivation for undertaking collaborative work is the desire to expand oneself, to transform and be transformed by the other. Furthermore, I would emphasise that collaboration is about process: for an endeavour to be truly collaborative, the partners must pay more attention to the *way* things are done than to *what* they are trying to make.

This time I find myself wandering like a true *flâneuse* along some unexpected avenues of thought. What might seem tangential is nearly always connected to two questions: firstly, with whom do I want to work and how; second, in what ways could a new attitude towards collaboration 'rewild' my new-music community? I am writing not for any particular audience this time so I have no map and no fixed destination. I have simply followed my nose, but along the way my thinking has been happily contaminated by the voices of Hélène Cixous, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, Bruno Latour and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.

It was Tsing who got me excited about mess when she wrote that

collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination.³

Where collaboration sounds sanitary, contamination is messy: it describes a two-way transformation, a risky infraction and a breaking through of walls. Collaboration, for me, is about the possibility to travel in new directions, to be contaminated and disrupted by other minds and other disciplines, other ways of thinking and doing. Tsing's image of contaminated entanglements reinforces my view that mess *is* the magic of so much good work and that the process of building new ways of thinking and doing in one arena of our lives rarely stays sequestered there. It also provides a framework loose enough for me to revisit old ideas about agency and authorship whilst bringing in new ideas about habits, stories and compost that explore the potential for anthropological, ecological and feminist thinking to contaminate and reinvigorate our collaborative models.

The quest for agency

² Fraser, p. 4.

³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 28.

In my earlier paper, I commented that one of the main reasons for investing in collaborative projects was to be stretched⁴ and observed that, in collaborative work with specific composers, I felt I had shifted from being an interpreter to being an agent in the creative process.⁵ Agency is associated with autonomy and with individual power, so how does this term come into play when discussing collaboration? Surely there is a conflict there? I would argue not: part of the magic of a true and successful collaboration is that both (or all) parties can increase their sense of individual agency without lessening the agency of the other(s). To borrow Donna Haraway's word, combined creative energies harnessed in *sympoiesis*, or 'making-with', are always more than the sum of their individual parts. However, it's worth noting that a misaligned or unhealthy collaboration is very likely to result in at least one party's agency being diminished. This is a risky business. Disentangling the self from the collective in collaboration is tricky, but my hunch is that it is each individual's responsibility to tend to their own needs and desires, and to communicate those effectively, within the common aims of the project.

Co-labour and authorship

Discussing authorship in the context of collaborative work is so important. In her characteristic messing around with language, Donna Haraway talks about the 'co-laborer' which suddenly, belatedly, had me reconsidering the etymology of the word 'collaborator' — this is, someone *with* whom (not *for* whom) I 'labour'. There is an implicit lack of hierarchy here, even if the precise nature of the labour may not be identical. Of course, it's not essential that every project redefine the roles completely or result in official co-authorship, but building a shared creative practice surely necessitates the navigation of some grey areas. And it does seem that many artists want a more inclusive, flexible model. In their book *The Second Sound: Conversations on Gender and Music*, Julia Eckhardt and Leen De Graeve observe that

The whole line of testimonies shows a general wish for change in the paradigm, away from the author as a single genius, towards an approach of creation which includes art, the field, and personal life-reality.⁶

To get practical for a moment, let us remember that the options for assigning and crediting authorship are many. At the personal level, it may be that a private acknowledgement of the co-labour, of the messy entanglements of ideas and inspiration, is adequate recognition. At the legal level, it's possible to set any ratio of the authorship rights with national bodies such as PRS or SACEM without fanfare. Arguably, the most powerful assertion of a collaborative effort is in publicity materials, but for a composer and performer to be credited as co-authors or co-composers is, regrettably, still something of a radical move in classical music. In my experience, pursuing this requires a united front and constant vigilance because so many classical music organisations aren't yet used to the co-

⁴ Fraser, p. 7.

⁵ Fraser, p. 11.

⁶ Julia Eckhardt and Leen De Graeve, *The Second Sound: Conversations on Gender and Music* (Gent : Umland, 2017), p. 113.

authorship model. It still surprises me that, when our creative juices have flowed so well in the act of making, they all too often desert us when faced with difficult conversations or intransigent marketing departments. Don't we owe it to our future selves to teach the industry how to serve its artists?

We are still so attached to vertical structures in classical music: outmoded hierarchies abound, in authorship, in billings, in fees, in dressing-room size, in governmental rescue packages... As H el ene Cixous wrote in her call-to-arms, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, back in 1976:

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.⁷

Habits to break; habits to build

Habit is a foundation of any practice. It is by embedding habits that we establish a technique; it is by embodying habits that I prepare material for performance. I have habits in the way that I practice, in the way that I plan my working time, in the way that I think about the voice or classical music or performance or art. Any two collaborators are unlikely to share the same habits and so it is that, through a close working partnership, fresh air can be blasted into their respective practices. Anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, who interrogates our understanding of semiosis and selves to propose an anthropology beyond the human, encapsulates this connection between habit and agency when he writes that,

Being alive — being in the flow of life — involves aligning ourselves with an ever-increasing array of emerging habits. The lively flourishing of that semiotic dynamic whose source and outcome is what I call self is also a product of disruption and shock.⁸

Within this disruption or shock we may well find that a habitual 'something' is absent, but absence means space, and space means room for change. Giorgio Agamben explains the creative importance of absence in terms of the Aristotelian concept of non-exercise, or not-doing:

The one who possesses—or has the habit of—a potential can both put it into action and not put it into action. Aristotle's brilliant, even if apparently obvious, thesis is that potential is essentially defined by the possibility of its non-exercise.⁹

⁷ H el ene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 4 (1976), 875-893 (875).

⁸ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2013), p. 62.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Act of Creation', *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism* (Redwood City : Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 16-17.

The word 'absence' all too often has negative connotations, but here it is offered as a creative tool, which may help us as individual and collaborative selves seeking agency. Eduardo Kohn expands our definition of 'selves' by exploring human interactions with nonhuman living:

Selves are the products of a specific relational dynamic that involves absence, future, and growth, as well as the ability for confusion. And this emerges with and is unique to living thoughts.¹⁰

We humans believe ourselves to be selves but, in Kohn's view, we are not the only ones. Does this confound the possibilities of collaboration? As the product of a 'specific relational dynamic', might a shared, collaborative practice be considered a self in its own right? If so, it's worth paying attention to the habits we build *into* our collaborative practices — for example, How is labour shared? How are working sessions documented? Who controls the public dissemination of material? How do we deal with confusion? — because the answers will shape this 'self' for good or for bad.

Stories as bridges

A lot has been said or written about the importance of dialogue between collaborating human selves, but what about stories? Every time we say 'What if we...' we are starting to tell a new story which is, as psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés affirms, a time-honoured and instinctual technique to overcome obstacles:

Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls...¹¹

The transformative power of a story is now being recognised in many disciplines as we acknowledge that we are not really objective and that we struggle to rationalise our way to new behaviour. George Monbiot asserts that we are 'creatures of narrative';¹² Kate Raworth's model of 'Doughnut Economics'¹³ employs storytelling to effect a paradigm shift. New stories emerge from fatigue and frustration, be it within our artistic practices or at societal systems, when we seek a way to bridge the gap between the present and the hoped-for future. Bruno Latour sees stories as harbingers of a new reality:

As for the loops that are beginning to be added to our existence, one after another, making us more aware every day of the reciprocal feedback among agents of the terrestrial world, we need to make models of them

¹⁰ Kohn, p. 92.

¹¹ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (London : Rider, 1992), p. 19.

¹² Viewable here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/george_monbiot_the_new_political_story_that_could_change_everything

¹³ Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London : Random House Business Books, 2017).

— fictions — long before they can be verified in reality. Fiction anticipates what we hope to observe soon.¹⁴

The stories that we tell matter so much. There is much important work to do replacing the problematic legacy of tidy, hierarchical, ‘vertical’ stories (such as the canon) in classical music with the potential legacy of entangled, multifarious, ‘horizontal’ stories. This isn’t something new — I’m sure we’ve been trying to dismantle the inequalities in classical music for at least a hundred years — but hopefully it feels more urgent because of related societal shifts. The story concerning female composers, for example, has changed because we made the effort to reimagine it. If we accept the potency of a story, we must also accept the potency of words. Words reveal so much, which is why I believe it matters to distinguish ‘co-creation’ from ‘commissioning’, and why talking and writing are often given so much space in so many collaborative partnerships. If we’re going to change the world with the collaborative work that we do or, better still, build new worlds, we must be precise and yet imaginative in the way we articulate our visions.

Hot compost piles

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, has found widespread appeal, with many of us enjoying the poetry and possibility of the image of a mycorrhiza, the mutual symbiotic association between a fungus and a plant. I’m drawn to the earthiness, the mess, and to the mystery of the mycelium — what pops up and where is always a surprise, just like so many of the fruits of our creative endeavours. All too often we tidy up before we’ve even started (ever had an idea killed by the process of writing a funding application?), or we can’t make the time to sit in the squalor and actually digest the mayhem.

The natural world has forever been an inspiration to artists. But I’m not here to talk about gazing at clouds or valleys: what excites me is the potential for the huge wealth of new ideas in other fields, many prompted by the environmental crisis, to help us further our thinking and our making as musicians. It all connects — we are bodies in this time and place; we interact with other bodies, beings and matter — yet a musician’s training is so narrow. Unlike those in the visual arts, we are not taught to engage with other disciplines or to integrate other areas of interest into our own practices. I worry that this isolation stultifies our capacity for transformation, which is precisely why our creative ecologies *need* messy, wild, tangential collaboration. If embarking upon collaboration, what can we, as musicians, learn from myccorhizal symbiosis? If celebrating difference and diversity, what can we draw from an anthropology beyond the human?

It all connects, but it would be a mistake to think that we — whether musicians, artists, women or living beings — are all the same. As Latour says:

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2017), p. 257.

... if we want to have a political ecology, we have to begin by acknowledging the *division* of a human species that has been prematurely unified. We have to make room for collectives in conflict with one another...¹⁵

We should not conform; we must stop tidying and unifying. Messy times are upon us and we would do well to habituate ourselves to getting our hands dirty. It's not only in response to the crisis of the Anthropocene that we are tempted either to retort that 'technology will fix it' or concede that 'we're doomed anyway'; it's sound advice that 'staying with the trouble is both more serious and more lively'¹⁶ as a response to most challenges. To continue with Haraway's words,

Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacely, entangled and worldly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude.¹⁷

Women's work

I now call myself a feminist. I was late to this party, but I have joined the fight for equality. Whilst I still haven't read much literature *about* feminism, I have for a few years been steeping myself in feminist literature, and the more I have listened to the voices of women such as Virginia Woolf, Deborah Levy and Audre Lorde, the more I have questioned the purpose of my music-making. It was not by conscious design that all my collaborative projects, so far, have been with other women. I think it just happened that I started working towards gender parity in my commissioning at about the same time that I began craving a more meaningful experience when working with composers. I had grown tired of feeling like a vessel for other people's creative visions; I had grown especially tired of contorting my sound — my body — to match other people's expectations. As soprano Bethany Beardslee has said

That's the one thing that's so wonderful about the human voice. You have your own timbre, and it's uniquely yours¹⁸

so why eliminate the most distinctive thing I can offer? I realised that I wanted the process of developing and then performing a new work to be more personally embodied, so I set about making space for a different sort of performer-composer encounter.

¹⁵ Latour, p. 247.

¹⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4.

¹⁷ Haraway, p. 4.

¹⁸ Bruce Duffie, *Soprano Bethany Beardslee: A conversation with Bruce Duffie*, <<http://www.bruceduffie.com/beardslee.html>> [accessed 15 January 2021].

Cixous throws down the gauntlet of an embodied revolution. Though she is describing the solitary act of 'women's writing' ('écriture féminine'), I have found these words to resonate through my collaborative work:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes...¹⁹

How to motivate the women of my generation to wreck and to write? How to learn from the long history of unhealthy collaboration, particularly between male composers and female performers in which the woman's creativity was appropriated and/or controlled by the man? How to move beyond gender in a wise way and harness the transformative potential of collaboration so that we can all flourish at no-one's expense?

As a woman, I continue to struggle to chart a wholesome route through the regular tiny instances of outright sexism or lazy gendered assumptions in my profession. As a new music soprano, I have had to grapple with the legacies of the amazing women who have blazed the trail before me: Cathy Berberian, Bethany Beardslee, Joan La Barbara, Dawn Upshaw, Barbara Hannigan, even. Surely all have their stories of stolen agency or overlooked contributions, and must have battled with the problematic roles of 'diva' or 'muse' to, in nearly all cases, male composers. But they do not represent one kind of woman, and I am not them. To quote Cixous again,

Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers.²⁰

This is one reason why I have invested so much in building my own repertoire: to avoid the trap of aping someone else. It's also a strong motivator behind my work with eavesdropping, as I strive to provide a platform for other women to test their own risky endeavours and increase their sense of agency.

Entangled selves

Contaminated entanglements describe not only the way I view my collaborative partnerships and practices but also the way I would like my practice as a whole to connect to the rest of my life. I am a musician. I am an environmentalist. I am a woman. I am these things and more, alone and alongside others. Integrating and recalibrating my sense of selves is a work in progress — albeit foregrounded under current conditions — and perhaps this is why collaboration is meaningful, because the mess is the upheaval of the personal bleeding into the professional, the old me giving way to the new...

¹⁹ Cixous, p. 886.

²⁰ Cixous, p. 892.

What I hope we can take from this is some encouragement to think outside the box when it comes to composer-performer collaboration in particular and collaboration in general. The imagery of stories, matsutake mushrooms or compost heaps should inspire us to risk more, but with our eyes open. Collaboration can be magical, it's just very important to acknowledge that you're likely to get bloodied and dirty along the way.

PART II IN THE THICK OF IT

In this part, I turn from theory to practice, and present three case studies. Again, this part can be read as a follow-up to the equivalent section in my earlier paper, as I document my ongoing collaborative work with composers Rebecca Saunders and Cassandra Miller, and reflect on a recent collaboration with composer Pia Palme and choreographer Paola Bianchi. While my perspective forms the basis of the case studies, this time I invited my collaborators to contribute. A lot is left unsaid. The perspectives are also not equivalent: where I focus on the project, I encourage my collaborators to share their more general thoughts on collaboration.

Working with Rebecca Saunders

I have been working with Rebecca since 2015. She has written two pieces for me: *Skin*, for soprano and 13 instruments, in 2016, and *The Mouth*, for soprano and tape, in 2020, and I have performed or premiered many other recent works. Rebecca's scores are always extremely precise. What's immediately obvious (and rare) is that she has really heard every sound that she has chosen, and that, as a result, her relationship with notation is very exacting — it truly is the medium through which her inner ear can speak to each performer. What I particularly appreciate about her vocal writing is that she is always embracing, emphasising even, the fact that the voice is *embodied*. She welcomes the grain of the instrument and the expressivity of a face at work to produce her desired sounds. The voice, in her hands, is honest and imperfect, always seeking first and foremost to communicate rather than to beguile.

As I've acknowledged before, our projects may not strictly be defined as 'collaborations', since we do adhere to the traditional composer-performer roles and we haven't built a shared process but I would argue that our work together has collaborative elements and is, often, transformative. Rebecca always works very closely with her performers when preparing to write a new piece, searching particularly for unstable sounds and idiosyncratic techniques which contribute to the drama and viscerality that are characteristic of her music. What she describes as 'exploratory sessions' are a whirlwind of experimentation, free-flowing ideas, risk-taking and laughter. I perceive these sessions as the collaborative heart of the process, since they form the intimate creative space from which a bespoke and transformative body of work can emerge.

We began work on *The Mouth* in 2019, joined by sound engineer Alexis Baskind. This time, the exploratory sessions served two purposes: firstly, to explore

sounds, starting with some of the motifs from earlier pieces but roving far beyond that to test some more extreme possibilities; second, to record all these experiments, assembling a bank of sounds that could eventually be used in the tape part. If I compare my memories of the sessions we had back in 2015 for *Skin* with the ones we had ahead of *The Mouth*, it's clear that I had grown considerably in confidence between the two. This time I felt able to contribute more. My knowledge of my own voice and my command over it has increased, as has my willingness to linger at the borders of what seems possible and to push past my own habits. We both acknowledge how lucky we were to find such a skilled and good-humoured colleague in Alexis: introducing a new collaborator to an established partnership can rock the boat but, partly because Rebecca is always firmly at the creative helm, in this instance we found only benefits.

The Mouth was premiered at IRCAM's rescheduled ManiFeste festival in Paris in September 2020²¹. This project took us all into new territory. I know that the compositional process was new for Rebecca, because of having a tape part; it's clear, too, that she has summoned a sound world in this piece that is strikingly different from preceding vocal works. The creative process emboldened me in many ways and I feel a strong sense of ownership over the piece: it feels made-to-measure, but with enough elastane that I can stretch to meet the extreme technical challenges, and is therefore thrilling to perform.

Rebecca's words on collaboration

Q. Do you consider your work(s) to be collaborative?

As a composer I always work closely with musicians. It feels essential. To understand how sounds are produced and absorb this information; to observe the bodily gesture making and containing the sounds, the physical limits and requirements of a sound, and also the blurred borders of a sound where, through research and experimentation, I can discover new (to me) means of expression and sound production.

Each performer has a particular personal approach to their instrument (or voice). There is the essentially personal and of course also the universal — what all violinists do/need/embody. This is fascinating and inspiring. The process [of writing a new piece] doesn't always involve working together as, if I have written much for, for example, the double bass then I don't always need to approach the instrument again as if for the first time. But with many musicians I have established long-term working relationships where we meet again and again, over many years, exploring particular facets of sound and sound production, [enabling me to discover] new sounds, and from these extremely inspirational collaborative sessions many pieces emerge. The actual sessions are mostly short and intense. This interdependence is very special. There isn't a hierarchy — it is very much that two musicians with different perspectives and skills join forces. But

²¹ Binaural video of the first performance of *The Mouth* (ManiFeste 2020) viewable here: <https://youtu.be/7XQh1XPl-7E>

the actual creative process, the composing itself, is my responsibility, and I perceive this is a separate aspect.

Once my experimentation is done, I withdraw and write alone. I find this also essential. Without performers music has of course no meaning, and the score I write is merely an abstraction. So the notation, the writing, everything, must be minutely thought through, be exact, and serve to communicate directly with the performer. I am responsible for the music, the piece or project, and I also feel responsible towards a musician — So no, my works are not collaborative, but I collaborate and work closely, indeed intimately, with musicians and not only is it critical for my work, it is enormous fun.²²

Q. Any further comments or observations?

Many pieces with a solo part, and really all pieces, are a kind of homage to performers. It is an honour and a privilege to work with performers. I don't think this is anything special — composers were in all ages themselves performers, leading the ensemble on the violin or the piano, whether performing in a royal court or house concerts — this close proximity to the performer and performance situation is organic and essential. Perhaps that's why my spatial collage pieces, which are mostly without a conductor, are so important to me: [in them] there is no go-between between myself and the musician — there is a collaborative, experimental, pro-active environment. Nevertheless, I carry the project and the responsibility for the artistic result. Where collaboration starts and stops, I don't know.²³

The *Tracery* project with Cassandra Miller

Stunned by the first performance of her *Duet for Cello and Orchestra*, I approached Cassandra about writing a piece for me in 2015, and we started work in October 2016. The result was — is — *Tracery*, a modular work for meditating singer and tape. Our process involves much sharing, as friends and as artists. We'd always begin with an update on our personal lives, and on our current creative desires and frustrations. We'd also share ideas for possible source materials. Once we were working with material, my main task was to get into the meditative zone, feeding back to Cassandra the sensations or emotions that surfaced. Hers was to record each pass, to 'compose' each subsequent headphone track, and to 'hold' me, I suppose, in my unguarded and open state. It's worth restating here that intimacy and vulnerability were at the heart of what we were trying to create together. We wanted something truly collaborative, and a lot of risk comes with that. To date, we have made five modules. We were halfway through making an hour-long installation for the Aldeburgh Festival when lockdown descended in March 2020. In retrospect, this commission marked a new chapter for the project.

²² Email from Rebecca Saunders to JF, 24 February 2020; revised 24 January 2021.

²³ *Ibid.*

Until this point, our collaborative process had been marked by an unhurriedness. Though there were deadlines to meet, somehow we always felt we had time to experiment, to discard at least as many ideas as we might test. Right from the outset there was also a very lovely enmeshing of the personal and the professional in the way that Cassandra and I worked together. With the great gift of the installation commission came a particular set of conditions and a significant change in pressure; the process that had evolved so spontaneously faltered under these new conditions and, to our terror, the magic evaporated. During a week-long residency in March 2020 it became clear that unhurriedness was off the table and roles would have to be formalised. This eroded some of the space that we were used to giving over to the personal and introduced an imbalance into the time and creative energy we were each contributing and thus our sense of agency and authorship. This was a stark reminder to me that the central ingredients of collaboration — good communication, intimacy and equality — demand time at every step along the way and cannot be taken for granted. Yes, it's laborious.

In fact, our process did prove resilient enough to generate some usable material. We made the *T. Rex* module²⁴ during that residency, and there are a couple more contenders filed away. The future of this project is, like everything at the moment, uncertain but I can say that the *Tracery* journey has been beautiful and surprising and truly transformative.

Cassandra's words on collaboration

Q. Do you consider your work(s) to be collaborative?

Yes, all of it, to differing degrees — or rather, in different ways. Some projects are properly collaborative in their workings, where another person and I work very closely together on the core aspects of the creative process, but other projects (even if I am simply 'delivering a score') almost always stem at the very least from a meaningful and nourishing mutual inspiration. I haven't thought about whether or not I am using the word 'collaborative' correctly in that context, but internally I do consider myself to be 'working together [with]' in those situations as well.

Generally though, in a sort of common sense of the term, *Tracery* and my duo with Silvia [Tarozzi] are my current projects which explicitly prioritise collaboration.²⁵

Q. What are the hallmarks of collaboration, in your experience, both in terms of process and outcome?

Hm. I find this question difficult actually. I don't know if I can answer it in general terms, perhaps only in relation to specific projects...

²⁴ Viewable here: <https://youtu.be/pCmHDvChtJc>

²⁵ Email from Cassandra Miller to JF, 2 July 2020.

What makes *Tracery* collaborative is a mutual investment in the creative process. We often (though not exclusively) have different roles, but we commit in principle to doing as much of the work together as possible. We try to share the workload, the decisions, the artistic risk and vulnerability, the credit — but more than this, it's about working together to find making-activities that we can do together that *flow* for both of us in the moment of making (flow having something to do with creativity, with shared explorative/nourishing meaningfulness), and to prioritise the experience of those making-activities above the outcome.

In terms of 'outcome', I'm not sure that *Tracery* is truly more collaborative than any other situation where the composer is hidden from the audience and the performer is on stage, doing the actual work of sharing with listeners (though I do hope that the music made reflects what was meaningful for both of us in the process, and that this somehow infuses your experience on stage).

When I work with Silvia, it has an additional layer of collaboration in that we are both on stage at the end. We also share more equally the initial impulse-ideas for getting work started and for where to go. It's also a bit more balanced in terms of preparation between sessions. There's something about performing together that flips it into being a band. With Silvia, the band is the project, the pieces are just things we do.²⁶

Q. What would you describe as the advantages and dangers of composer-performer collaboration?

Advantages are many. Primarily friendship — isn't music something we do with friends? Isn't that what it's for? These projects are satisfying and nourishing, both musically and outside of music. Essentially to 'compose' in this way is to propose a friendship in music. Not sure I need to pick apart why that's wonderful. Learning together, witnessing life together, accompanying each other, listening to ourselves through the ears of the other, participating in what is meaningful to the other.

Dangers are also big. I have not found any trouble in the things that perhaps people talk about as [being] tricky: sharing credit, work, vulnerability, time, finances, decisions. All that is easy with good will and discussion. The difficult thing is what can happen when the needs of the collaborative relationship are at odds with the needs of a production deadline. It can become (all of a sudden and by surprise) impossible to navigate the needs of a production, the needs of the relationship, the needs of the other person, the needs of the self, when there is not enough time to do so. And then the horror of watching this beautiful thing fall apart is more heart-breaking than can be expressed.²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Q. Any further comments or observations?

Just that I think this is all bigger than the words. It's not really that collaboration is a way of 'working'— it's not really an artistic choice or a career choice — but it seems to me that 'collaboration' is a term we use when we talk about art-making as real life. And then it gets complicated like life gets complicated. Probably all composing always was this, but as composers we tend to think that we separate it out by pretending our pieces are products, objects. I know I'm being quite vague. I think I'm avoiding the essentialisation/definition of any of this: it's all a bit more alive than any definition I can muster.²⁸

***Wechselwirkung*, a collaborative project with Pia Palme and Paola Bianchi**

Early in 2018 I received an email from composer Pia Palme²⁹ inviting me to join a multi-stranded research project. In it, Pia set out her intention to explore

the contemporary terrains of composition and music theatre as they are interwoven with feminist practice, theory, and aesthetics

and she stated that

Exchange with performers and colleagues is vital for the process, and will be cultivated throughout the project.³⁰

'Bold claims,' I thought. 'I've heard it all before,' I thought. But I clambered aboard. Looking back at that email, what's striking is that, despite the references to 'listening', 'cooperation' and 'exchange', Pia never uses the word collaboration: maybe she, like me, felt that it was often overused and therefore empty.

This was, essentially, a research project that would have as one of its 'outputs' a new piece of music theatre for singer, choreographer/dancer Paola Bianchi and Ensemble PHACE. In February 2020, I joined Pia and Paola, along with musicologist and research assistant Christina Lessiak, in Vienna for the first of two development periods. At this point, Pia had sketches of music for me to read, and Paola had a choreographic schema to share: the plan was to discover to what extent I could combine them. (It's important to say that I have no movement or dance training!) Pia's sketches contained both extremely detailed, complex notated material and much looser, gestural motifs, designed to stimulate improvised material. Paola was using a choreographic system that she had developed (thankfully) for non-dancers: a series of recorded audio instructions described a pose that, through repeated listening, could be learned, embodied, and then strung together to form a sort of free sequence. These three days were exhausting. Learning the choreography demanded intense concentration and a lot of courage. I was frustrated that I hadn't had time to memorise the music and so

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ I had performed a work by Pia with my ensemble, EXAUDI, in 2015. Available here: <https://soundcloud.com/palmeworks/mordacious-lips-to-dust>

³⁰ Email from Pia Palme to JF, 28 February 2018.

couldn't really combine the singing and the movement. The whole experience was so far outside my comfort zone, and it was exhilarating.

But it could have been a nightmare. What made this a positive experience was the atmosphere in the room. From the beginning there was a sense of spaciousness to the creative environment and there was careful, respectful dialogue. It helped that Pia and Paola already had a history of working together, so there was a confident bond at the heart of the project. It was also a strength, I think, that we were four in the creative space and that no two roles were alike. Progress was limited during the second development period, in September 2020: I had hurt my back, Paola had burnt her arm, everyone was anxious about the pandemic... We concluded with a clear vision of the piece, but a daunting amount of work still to do. For me, the biggest questions still remained: Could I memorise such a complex score? Could I perform the movements in a convincing way? Could I combine the two with any confidence?

Against all the odds, we gathered in Vienna in November 2020 and pulled the piece together, filming it for Wien Modern. Achieving this does feel like something of a miracle both at a personal level and against the broader backdrop of a cultural sector in paralysis, and stands as testimony to the trust that Pia places in her collaborative partners. The resulting piece, *Wechselwirkung*,³¹ is one of the most challenging works I have performed, and probably the most collaborative. I gave myself one rule during this project: don't think about whether it works. That, I decided, was someone else's job. I was in terrain that was far beyond my expertise, and I was far too inside the task to attempt to assess it from the outside. I had to take a risk with what I was offering. And I had to trust my collaborators.

Pia's words on collaboration

Q. Do you consider your work(s) to be collaborative?

In every aspect, my practice — as composer, performer, and artistic researcher — is intrinsically and thoroughly a collaborative practice. During the pandemic crisis, I became increasingly aware of how I move and work within a dense network of collaborators, within an interconnected community. For example, I connect to performers, artists, ensembles, organisers, technicians, venues, PR people, instrument-makers (I have long-standing relationships with my instrument-makers), conductors, curators, stage-crews, funding bodies, printmakers [and] programmers (I rely on hardware and software in making electronic music; I connect personally to manufacturers and programmers and give feedback whenever I can). I discuss things and talk about my needs with these people and listen to what they have to say. In my artistic research, I constantly discuss things, read publications, share and talk with colleagues. In fact, I belong to a wide ecosystem consisting of various disciplines, practices, crafts and arts. Music is a forest, and I'm a tree of my own within this living

³¹ A film of the piece, presented by Wien Modern and Fragility of Sounds, is viewable until 13 February 2021 here: <https://vimeo.com/497323866>

entity. I stand on my own, but could not thrive without others of my kind. This might, again, be the Anthropocene throwing its shadow onto theatre: our situation makes me realise how interconnected things are — *Wechselwirkungen* and interferences everywhere.³²

Q. What would you describe as the advantages and dangers of composer-performer collaboration?

The most delightful experience in a collaboration for me is the sense of sparks jumping over between artistic-minded individuals, a spark that can trigger something that reaches beyond what was there before, into some new terrain. When that particular occurrence happens, I feel it in a physical sense. Moreover, this experience seems to happen in a space outside of myself, yet connected to me — a ‘third space’ (in the sense of Winnicott’s transitional zone)?

Every collaboration unfolds in a unique way as a specific relationship — like a love affair, in a way. Some collaborations last longer, some are short term affairs. Some barely come together and some actually break apart. [In terms of] composer-performer collaboration: [what is] important is to keep a certain kind of professional distance while opening up in an artistic sense, not holding back. Respecting each other’s discipline and being curious about the other but not switching the disciplines. Learning, not imposing. Giving space, and taking responsibility at the same time. Knowing one’s own expertise. Not giving up. Entering discussions without fear or hesitation. Daring.³³

Q4. Any further comments or observations?

For *Wechselwirkung*, I brought together a core group of five main collaborators. Rather soon, this collaborative group formed an ecosystem that began to develop by itself. I felt very much attracted to observe the various relationships, threads and filaments evolving between us, a kind of musical nerve fibres. Aside from being part of the overall collaborators’ mesh, I distinctly experienced the unique relationship with every individual contributor — a relationship depending on the professional cooperation we shared. With Irene Lehman, the theatre scholar, my relationship felt vividly intellectual: quick-footed meetings occurred mostly online, with lots of verbal exchanges. With Christina Lessiak, my partner in research and project partner, the collaboration became a management and research affair in the best sense of the word: a more functional, practical and respectful connection. Apart from endless exchanges about how to organise this and that in times of crisis, we also met over topics of feminism and listening, and we exchanged our research observations. With dancer and choreographer Paola Bianchi, my

³² Email from PP to JF, 20 January 2021.

³³ *Ibid.*

relationship was intense and included edges and conflicts. I experienced it as quite physical, because of Paola's professional involvement with the group as a dancer and stage designer. Our relationship grew and took place in the theatrical terrains of space, stage design, movement and dramaturgy. With Paola, I felt the clashing of theatre disciplines that oftentimes draw on different systems of expertise and hierarchy. Often, I felt the need to negotiate and translate between the two of us. I felt high respect towards her work, underpinned by a sense of warmth and distance at the same time. From the compositional angle, it was most interesting to watch how Paola's and my ideas came together in the practice of Juliet Fraser — the singer who physically brought together the artistic collaboration between Paola and myself, merging it with her soprano voice, her expertise as a vocal performer, and her body work. The nexus Juliet/Paola/myself was an intense affair. It is hard to find words for this complex collaboration that I want to investigate more deeply.

The collaboration with Juliet was at the core of the piece, it was the heart of the composition. Furthermore, she pointed out Francesca Caccini's work to me; the composer's texts and songs became important elements to work with for *Wechselwirkung*. To me, the collaborative relationship with Juliet felt fragile and very professional at the same time, quite intimate and touching. Very much happened on a fictitious level: when composing alone [at] my desk, Juliet's voice rang in my ear, for hours and days. For writing the piece, I had to imagine her physical presence as a singer. This is the thing a lover would do when imaging the beloved person — in my case, it happened from a compositional and professional interest. A fascinating turn, the compositional twist on the old theme of love? Is this, then, a collaboration, too, or is it pure dreaming? In my mind's ear and eye, I saw and heard my collaborators, I conceptualised shared musical and theatrical activities that I wished to happen in the future. Shorter, real-life research sessions and sequences of feedback exchanges back and forth augmented the longer process of composition, until in the end we all came together physically, to rehearse and produce the piece in Vienna.

Then, during the final rehearsal period before the premiere, it was interesting to observe how our core group of five suddenly integrated into the much larger community who assembled to stage the piece. It seems that because the five of us trusted in our connection, having gone through a long and intense process together, we managed to integrate the entire group into a collaborative body.³⁴

Paola's words on collaboration

Q. Do you consider your work(s) to be collaborative?

³⁴ *Ibid.*

I have been working alone for many years, I could say for as long as I can remember, but I am never alone in creating a show. There are moments of profound loneliness, of course, but without a series of companions a show wouldn't be born! Working in the theatre presupposes a strong collaboration between all those involved in the creation of a performance. The creation of a performance is something you do together with other people, you have to rely on different skills (performers, music, lighting, sometimes scenery and costumes).³⁵

Q. What are the hallmarks of collaboration, in your experience, both in terms of process and outcome?

It is rightly necessary to make a distinction between process and outcome. The process is the part of the work that most involves collaboration — and by collaboration I also mean the discussions around the concept, discussions that can take place only among the close members of the working group or be extended to other figures (scholars, critics, professionals). The research and study phase is, even in the solitude of the studio, full of meetings, questions and comparisons. It is absolutely important that all the people who will participate in the creation of the performance are fully informed about the phases of the process. The conceptual involvement of everyone is an integral part of my work. It is indeed important that by the time we enter the room to start rehearsals, everyone understands the concept and brings their thoughts translated into their own discipline. Even during the rehearsals, it is essential that everyone involved works together, even if, unless it is a purely collective work, whoever takes the lead (whether choreographer or director) makes the final decision. There are no majority decisions. There are discussions, different thoughts, but the character of an artistic work must be precise, clear. Then when it is time to go on stage, collaboration is obviously needed again. A lighting technician, for example, can ruin your show if he/she decides to change the lights during the performance, as can a dancer or a musician. I would also include the audience, a fundamental part of the live performance, without whom my work would not exist. Theatre is made of people, of several people working together. Without collaboration it does not exist.³⁶

Three threads woven through a year

These three, very different projects all culminated in 2020. They represent some of the major milestones in that year, proud as I am of the final works and of having survived the challenges (some pandemic-related; some not) that they posed. Yes, all three happen to have been with, or between, women. Beyond that, though, I think there are very few similarities between the projects in terms of process or outcome. Their musical concerns and style certainly vary hugely, and anyway I fiercely resist the notion of 'feminine' or 'female' music.

³⁵ Email from Paola Bianchi to JF, 10 January 2021.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Each has had a significant impact on my work and on the way I think about my work. Working with Rebecca on *The Mouth* reminded me that a partnership doesn't need to be enmeshed at every stage to cultivate ownership and agency. This most recent period working on *Tracery* taught me that a shift in conditions can severely test a collaborative process. The project with Pia and Paola showed me that remarkable trust and respect between partners can hold a whole lot of mess.

PART III STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE

To be honest, there have been times in the past few years when I have despaired, when I have seriously considered having a T-shirt made with FUCK COLLABORATION across its front. I have been frustrated by the work. I have been hurt by my colleagues. I have been bored by the whole topic. I am wiser, though: I think I see collaboration for what it is, now, which is a pretty irresponsible chemical experiment — as for the outcome, all bets are off.

I would now define collaboration as 'the *process* of developing a shared and *transformative* practice that intentionally cultivates an intimate creative space and produces a distinctive body of work.' The purpose of collaboration is to explore a new process of making, and the hope is that the results somehow make a new proposition. And we do need propositions: in the words of Latour,

If, as the old maxim maintains, "politics is the art of the possible," there still need to be arts to multiply the possibles.³⁷

In terms of the purpose of collaborative work within my broader practice, it occurs to me that to judge individual pieces, or projects, is to miss the point: each commission, each new idea, is both a response to what has come before (sometimes a reaction against) and a bid for something new. My repertoire as a whole is a sequence of constantly re-orienting links — a fungal network! — a quest for the holy grail of fulfilment. The common thread through them all is a narcissistic obsession with growth. Shoshana Rosenberg and Hannah Reardon-Smith capture this well in their 'toolkit for transformative sound use': in all my music-making I want to be

engaging with sound use that stirs something within, something direct and determined to make itself known in the world.³⁸

I think my fascination with collaboration endures because I recognise that it is a rare thing. I've realised that I don't *need* it, necessarily; also that it only makes sense with particular people and under particular conditions. As I hope is clear by now, I do not fetishize collaboration as the only means by which to create meaningful work but it is one tool for change. I am weary of the old propositions

³⁷ Latour, p. 257.

³⁸ Shoshana Rosenberg and Hannah Reardon-Smith, 'Of Body, Of Emotion: A toolkit for transformative sound use', *TEMPO*, 292 (2020), 64-73.

in classical music that reinforce the hierarchies and the fixed roles, and ghettoise us, or encourage us to ghettoise ourselves. Some of us, at least, need to stay with the trouble. Habits form attitudes; absence creates opportunity; new stories dismantle old myths. This is why I am stimulated by the poetic imagery of cosmic connection that I find in other fields: I need to keep my horizons wide and I need new stories to tell other stories with.³⁹

Juliet Fraser
January 2021

³⁹ Haraway, p. 12.

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