

## I. WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

What does this word mean? Why do we use it? How is 'collaborating' different from simply 'working with' somebody? Historically, 'collaboration' was a word that had bite. Think of a political collaborator — in that context we understand that there was deep engagement at play and something potentially transgressive about that engagement. Hold that thought in mind...

In the past decade or so there has been a fungal blooming of research into collaborative practices in classical music<sup>1</sup>. Most researchers identify a sliding scale of ways in which we work together. The least enmeshed models might be described as 'participatory' or 'interactive', perhaps including workshops or exploratory sessions, but fundamentally each person fulfils their traditional role. For example, writer writes words; composer composes music; performer performs the piece. That sort of non-collaborative model is tried and tested, and beautifully efficient. By contrast, collaborative models see roles blurred and habits dislodged as the collaborators create a fully enmeshed practice that results in distinctive new work.

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Collaboration is inherently risky. When you commit to abandoning traditional roles or working practices, everything becomes uncertain. But how often do we acknowledge this? People seem to waltz into collaborative projects without understanding that they are choosing uncertainty and unpredictability, that they are cultivating the conditions for a project to fail spectacularly!

Unfortunately, there are structural issues within our industry that encourage us to idealise or idolise collaboration without considering what the risks are. It tends to be that we dream up the project, we fundraise for it and we sell it before any sort of collaborative relationship has actually been developed. And therein lies the risk. Collaborative projects stand or fall on the quality and equality of the collaborative partnership. Most of the time, when things go wrong it's because an imbalance creeps into the working partnership.

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Buzz words. You know the ones: innovation, outreach, impact, multi-disciplinarity, inclusivity and, yes, collaboration. I used to think that I was adept at employing this language only when necessary, when writing funding applications. But I'm not so sure now. These words have slunk into our very thinking, appearing indiscriminately in marketing copy, press releases, reviews and even informal conversations between otherwise critically engaged artists. Can we just think about what it means to 'measure' music in this way, and how it might be impacting our creativity?

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<sup>1</sup> For example, by Sam Hayden & Luke Windsor (2007), Heather Roche (2011), Zubin Kanga (2014) and Luke Nickel (2016).

I did a quick bit of research. I went to a big funder's website (the PRS Foundation<sup>2</sup>) and I searched for the number of entries that include the words 'collaboration', 'collaborative' or 'collaborate' in their short description: there was a combined total of 798 results. Next I searched for the word 'musician': that yielded 863 results. Well, 798 against 863: this implies that there are almost as many collaborative ventures as there are musicians! Perhaps that's not a huge surprise, but doesn't this challenge the idea that collaborating, in and of itself, is innovative?!

Personally, I am bored of the word. It's everywhere; it no longer means anything. But that number 798 suggests that, even if collaboration *is* a hackneyed idea, we are still desperate to collaborate! Why? I worry that we are often motivated by dubious things: wanting to excite funders, promoters or marketing departments; worse, I fear we may often choose potential collaborators because we hope our career might advance through that association. As Kae Tempest writes in their book *On Connection*:

The tendencies of our time are stamped so violently upon us, they emerge in our actions unbidden. When we are fixated on what we can get from an exchange, or how we can benefit, instead of considering what we can offer, we are being exploitative. This fixation can be so intrinsic, we imagine ourselves innocent of it. Unintentional exploitation is exploitation, none the less.<sup>3</sup>

Do we even think about what we are offering? Do we examine honestly why we have approached a particular collaborator? Do we ask what *their* needs might be?

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I've said before that a collaboration, like a marriage, should not be entered into 'unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly'. A fruitful collaboration also benefits from a degree of maturity. This isn't necessarily about age, but it is about **self-knowledge**. If you're going to be clear about what you can give and where your boundaries are, you need to know yourself, and your craft, pretty well. And let's speak about **craft**<sup>4</sup>. This is an unfashionable word but it underpins any interesting creative practice and it's crucial to a productive collaboration. I'm doubtful that you can offer all that much to a collaborative partner until you have some confidence about your craft, that is to say some tools and a technique that serve your 'creative compass'<sup>5</sup>.

So I wish that promoters, producers, agents and funders would stop tacitly or actively encouraging emerging-generation artists to collaborate, as if collaboration is a benign form of artist development. Or, if they're going to encourage collaboration, they should support young artists properly in finding the right collaborative partners and in creating the safe space in which to take the risks and make the risky work. And note, please, that I say collaborative partners *plural* — I've seen too many young opera composers hitch their wagon to one starry librettist or director too soon, and miss out on a breadth of experimentation at that crucial stage of development.

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<sup>2</sup> The PRS Foundation for Music. Available at: <https://prsfoundation.com> [accessed 13 July 2022].

<sup>3</sup> Kae Tempest, *On Connection* (Faber & Faber, 2020), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Kae Tempest also has good words on craft, see Tempest 2020, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> This is a term Kae Tempest uses.

## II.

I now want to share a short personal reflection on collaboration and then offer a manifesto.

I've spent nearly 20 years working closely with composers. I've commissioned composers during that time, too, but I still wouldn't describe most of those encounters as collaborative. Things took a new direction in about 2015 when I decided to explore the possibilities of working collaboratively. I've written two very long papers<sup>6</sup> about these experiences and I don't want to cover old ground here — all you need to know is that I've put the hours in.

I may be bored of the word, I may be sceptical about many so-called collaborative endeavours, but I am here because I think collaboration can be transformational. I now view my collaborative projects as a form of activism. The politics may be more or less explicit in the final work, but the whole adventure is likely to be motivated by a desire to disrupt. If I am going to invest time, energy and vulnerability in a collaborative project, I want it to effect some sort of change. From my position as a grand old dame of new music, I am thinking now about the platform that I can offer to others. I am trying to ask, "how can I help?" rather than "what can I gain?" Furthermore, I am now prepared for my personal politics — my feminism and my environmentalism, for example — to bleed into the public arena of my music-making. This is extra risky, but it feels necessary. And so, here is my

### MANIFESTO

#### COLLABORATION AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

##### **1. Collaboration should not be predictable.**

Things should break. Ideas and practices should crack open and new, unimaginable creatures should crawl forth.

##### **2. Collaboration should not be clean.**

Collaboration means contamination. Collaboration means scrabbling around in 'hot compost piles'<sup>7</sup>. Get your hands dirty.

##### **3. Collaboration should not be safe.**

Why are you doing this if not to change and to be changed? Risks must be taken. You must be ready to be vulnerable, to meet the edges of yourself and then be carried into dangerous new terrain. AND SO....

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<sup>6</sup> Juliet Fraser, 'The voice that calls the hand to write' (2019) and 'In the thick of it' (2021), available at: <https://www.julietfraser.co.uk/essays/>

<sup>7</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4.

#### **4. Collaboration requires consent.**

You are responsible for your own boundaries. You are responsible for the clear and constructive communication of your needs and desires. And you need to practice what you preach: you are responsible for *seeking* consent as well as granting or denying it.

#### **5. Collaboration requires trust.**

No-one can be expected to share new thoughts or experiment with new methods without trusting that those thoughts and experiments will be held responsibly and compassionately. And building trust takes communication, respect and... time.

#### **6. Collaboration requires time, and time (usually) costs money.**

Hurry any of this relational underpinning and you will stumble. It takes time to create a safe and happy collaborative environment and it takes time then to play in it, to experiment, to fail, to try another way. All this time usually costs money or, if it doesn't, it depends upon privilege. Just things to think about.

#### **7. Collaboration requires vigilance.**

Collaborative creativity doesn't end when the work is made. If you've blurred the roles, if you've enmeshed your practices, if you've razed old hierarchies to the ground and found new methods of making, you are going to have to fight to have all that unorthodoxy reflected in marketing copy, in press materials, in royalties, copyright and licensing agreements.

#### **8. Collaboration is not compulsory.**

It's not the only model. It's not a better model. A lot of fantastic work gets made alone or by people working together in an informal, breezy way. In the words of composer 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>8</sup>*

#### **9. Collaboration is not cool.**

If you're on trend, you're not risking anything.

#### **10. Collaboration is a tool for change.**

It should challenge the status quo, whether within you as an artist, within our industry or within our society. How direct, how overt that challenge is and what form it takes is up to you. In her *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*, Lola Olufemi writes:

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<sup>8</sup> John Croft, 'On Working Alone' in Clarke & Doffman (eds) *Creativity, Improvisation and Collaboration*. OUP 2018, page 199.

The role of the artist in the revolution is to look around and see what needs doing. Pick up a weapon like everyone else, run.<sup>9</sup>

Collaboration. A word that is so overused and underestimated. I am a language nerd, yes, because I believe that words have power. I wish we could make this word unfashionable again and give it back its teeth so that, when it *is* used, it has bite.

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<sup>9</sup> Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Hajar Press, 2021), p. 117.

## RESOURCES

Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 4 (1976), 875-893

John Croft, 'On Working Alone' in Clarke & Doffman (eds) *Creativity, Improvisation and Collaboration* (OUP, 2018)

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

Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, 'Collaboration and the Composer: case studies from the end of the 20th century', *TEMPO*, 240 (2007)

Irene Lehmann and Pia Palme (eds), *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology* (Wolke, 2022)

Luke Nickel. 'Occam Notions: Collaboration and the performer's perspective in Éliane Radigue's *Occam Ocean*.' *TEMPO* 275 (2016)

Lola Olufemi *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Hajar Press, 2021)

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

Kae Tempest, *On Connection* (Faber & Faber, 2020)

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

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

<http://10statements.com>

10 Statements is a project about collaborative practices in new music initiated by Roberto Maqueda and Jennifer Torrence in 2019. The project invites performers and composers to share and document their own collaborative practices through text, image, audio, and other formats. The goal of the project is to create a space for sharing knowledge, approaches, works, and resources for musicians working or wishing to work in co-creative ways.