

Collaborative understandings in the preparation of a new work for viola and piano

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The interpretation of a musical work can draw on multiple sources, including aural experiences, metaphors, written texts, and other works by and interactions with the composer. These “experiential anchors” resonate with previous musical experiences to inform an “interpretive platform” from which a performer’s practice and performing process develops. As such, the first stage of learning a new work is vastly different for canonic repertoire than it is for a piece that is newly composed. This paper reports findings from a project of commissioned works that were received without explanatory program notes from the composers. This enabled a unique interrogation of the process through which an interpretive platform is built and negotiated. Focusing on a work for viola and piano composed by one of the authors, the collaborators share their individual interpretive frames with each other for the first time as part of the paper-writing process. The subsequent response and rethinking of the work, when underlying compositional thinking is given, is described as dialogue. The paper uncovers some of the differences and intersections that may lead to a collaborative interpretive platform. They also reveal insights into the hierarchical relationship between creator and interpreter.

Keywords: new music; collaboration; interpretation; practice-led research

Collaborative understandings within a chamber music duo are concerned with seeking an interpretation of the work that is satisfying to both performers. This paper investigates the collaborative understandings that developed while learning a new viola and piano work titled *Into the Sun* (Blom in press). One of several works commissioned for a project titled *Australia East and*

West, it was submitted without explanatory program notes from the composer. Delaying any conversation about compositional thinking enabled the researchers to interrogate the interpretative process as it occurred individually and, later, as it developed into a collaborative understanding. The project, therefore, considered the interpretation of the musical artifact in terms of output and process at each of its stages.

While there is a growing literature on learning a work new to the performer (Hallam 2001), less emphasis has been placed on approaching music that is newly composed. One exception is Clarke *et al.*'s (2005) study of preparing the piano work *entre-temps* by Bryn Harrison. The study prompted pianist Philip Thomas to advocate for further research into "...the relationship between notation and intention, and how performers take an active role in the creative act of forming the material" (Clarke *et al.* 2005, p. 41). Little evidence was found of "any substantial change in Philip's approach [interpretation] over the rehearsal period" (p. 61). This led to questions about whether there was not some situation in which the performer "thinks it his responsibility to change in this piece," and to ask whether there was a "lack of imagination? Or even the abdication of a performer's responsibility?" (p. 61).

Feld (1994, p. 86) argued that as one listens to music, one works through "the dialectics in a series of 'interpretative moves', developing choices and juxtaposing background knowledge." As such, "we rarely confront sounds that are totally new, unusual, and without experiential anchors. Hence, each experience in listening necessarily connotes prior, contemporary, and future listenings" (p. 83). In line with this, Viney and Blom (2013) identified the need to build an "interpretative platform" from which to learn new and conceptually challenging works.

METHOD

Participants and materials

The study adopted a practice-led research approach. The participant status of the two researchers presented a unique opportunity to research the development of an interpretative platform from within the practice. In order to expose the process and reveal the collaborative dialogue, the practice-led research was positioned within analytic autoethnography. Accordingly, the participant researchers were each: "(1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (Anderson 2006, p. 373).

Into the Sun (2010) was written for a project of new music for viola and piano. It draws on traditional styles yet still requires the establishment of an “interpretative platform” from which the performers shape the work.

Procedure

Drawing on the successful approach employed by Clarke *et al.* (2005), data were amassed through journaling, email dialogue, and face-to-face discussion. While Ginsborg and King (2007) focused beyond the individual reflective journal to analyse discussion between members of duos involving both professionals and students, in this paper the written dialogue takes the first-person form used by Määttänen and Westerlund (2001).

RESULTS

The viola player

“I have worked with the pianist-composer as a research collaborator. Through these interactions I have heard several of her works. Learning *Into the Sun* means reorienting existing interactions so that the collaborative writing ceased to be about the practice and began to come from within it.

The lack of program notes has prompted some assumptions: for example, the title of the work and the broader project led me to imagine the Western Australian sunset. Similarly, mid-way through the work there is figure reminiscent of Brahms’ *Sonatasatz* (the scherzo from his F.A.E. sonata). Unsure as to whether this reference was intended, I went back to the score to look for hints about the length and weight of each note. I finally determined to ‘play it like Brahms’ and see what happened! It was this heavy interpretation that prompted the suggestion of a double-stopped note for some iterations of the figure. Similarly, the rhythm of one passage reminded me of Ross Edwards’ *Ecstatic dance II*, familiar in its arrangement for viola and cello. This resulted in a playful, dance-like interpretation of the passage.

The haunting opening phrase reminded me of early 20th century works for viola by Fürst and Hindemith, who drew uniquely sonorous tones from the instrument; hence there were works of reference. Most works in the classical music repertoire have multiple interpretations from which the performer can draw, but these can also be constraining factors. My experience of rebelling, with new interpretations of canonic repertoire, is that this sense of freedom takes confidence to uphold. This is partly because explaining and defending new interpretations is difficult for performers, who often have little voice beyond program notes and introductions.”

The pianist-composer

“*Into the Sun* was begun late in 2008. In this year I had written *Phoebus Fire*, which brings together texts about the sun. One text drew on the image that opens Julian Barnes’ novel *Staring at the Sun*. The text describes a WWII airman who is flying back to the UK. Becoming dazzled and confused as the sun appears to rise twice, he plunges to his death in the sea below. This ‘airman’ section became part of *Into the Sun*. Driving in Sydney and flying west to Perth can often be into the sun, so I am pleased to know of Dawn’s similar thinking.

The work is in four sections, and harmonically it bases itself on the initials of the two performers, D and B. The opening has some evocation of the sun rising and briefly references chords that ‘represent’ clouds. These references were drawn from my short piano works titled *Cloud Studies*. The moving-quaver second section has the idea of changing meters, creating the ‘heavy’ dance quality of progressive rock.

I remembered a work for viola and piano where the piano is above the viola in a reversal of roles, so to speak. We eventually discussed the influence because I wanted to identify the piece, which was Brahms’ *Sonata* for viola and piano. The lyrical third section is the ‘airman’s’ song. After its even softer reprise, the work reintroduces the ‘progressive rock’ briefly before returning to the ‘setting of the sun’ in the final bars. After reading Dawn’s comments, I am interested to see if the ‘sunset’ in question, that of the airman, is of interest to her.”

The viola player

“I’m shocked, because the ending of *Into the Sun* is so peaceful and tranquil. I have prepared this closing section to create a mood of near stillness, and in my mind I had a serene image of the setting sun; but the passage is actually about someone’s death. There is no doubt that this will change the way I see this section, and in fact the whole piece. I need to play through the work to see the extent to which it will influence my thinking....

Playing through the work again, I am surprised at the impact this new knowledge has had on every aspect of my interpretation. The Ross Edwards-like dance figure was not part of Diana’s compositional thinking. It now appears to me as a startled moment when it was not possible for the pilot to see ahead; more like a dance with death. The Brahms-derived figure is now much more serious, and there is an element of danger from the moment the second section starts. The ending now represents the silence that falls when, in day-

light, the pilot and his aircraft have disappeared into the ocean. I am mindful that I have replaced one set of assumptions with another.

I discovered that ‘double sunset’ relates to WWII Catalina seaplanes, which took off from the Swan River in Perth. I would like to ask whether this was part of Diana’s interpretive frame. If not, does this knowledge add to the frame or distort it? It is evident that performers can take a descriptive title and completely misinterpret a work. I reflect that we can also ‘bow’ to the thinking of the creator and to the ‘accepted’ interpretation of someone other than the creator. Allowing this to lead our interpretation and thinking effectively locks us out of the creative process.”

The pianist-composer

“I didn’t have this knowledge about the seaplanes. Please don’t take the airman story too literally in the music—don’t read too many deep and dark details into it.”

DISCUSSION

The collaborators have now rehearsed the work with a shared dialogue, and the piece has developed a strong sense of mood, dynamic range, and momentum. However, the comment about whether to work, with one’s own interpretation of the title, will ‘bow’ to knowledge that has been given is at the heart of this discussion. In the first stage of learning, and working directly with the composer, the viola player was cautious about making suggestions that altered the score. Once these were accepted, the violist began to act as a collaborator. This was far removed from the “lack of imagination” noted by Clarke *et al.* (2005) and led to the realization that the performer’s experience of autonomy is often diminished by the expectations of an established work or the “finality” of a written score. Indeed, performers in the Western classical tradition are rarely given opportunities to be part of the creation itself.

In this study, the process through which individual and then collaborative understandings were built and negotiated to shape an “interpretative platform” brought the players face-to-face with the issue of how much compositional knowledge is useful and how much becomes dangerous. Eventually, tempering was required as part of the collaborative discussion, which led to a shared understanding. Both collaborators found the experiential anchors useful initially, but their roles faded as the piece took on its own shape and life. This process is what is required when performers, who are also listeners, approach a piece of music that is new to them. Of course, the nature of the piece influences the complexity of the approach.

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