Roger Mills

Tele-Improvisation: Intercultural Interaction in the Online Global Music Jam Session

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Foreword

Since the beginning of human time, people have congregated in social spaces for the purpose of enacting shared experience and theatrical representation. Whether it be the ancient Greek Dionysus Theatre, the Roman Colosseum, Japanese Noh Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Wagner's Festspielhaus, et al., the evolution of theatre has been a history of evolving social and performance spaces. These social spaces that have provided the setting for representational enactments of conflict and drama, music and performance, poetry and stagecraft can be thought of as "third space" environments. What do we mean by the third space? This is a socio-spatial concept used in various contexts that have been traditionally described as the place where people gather for cultural experience outside of the home (first space) or work (second space). Throughout history, the third space as a theatrical setting is where we have come to gather and witness the unveiling of the spectacle of the human comedy.

Up until the nineteenth century, we would have thought of the third space as having finite, physical boundaries, an enclosed architectural entity that unites the audience with the stage and its performers. But in 1844, we saw the beginning of the erosion of the physicality of the third space. In that year, Samuel Morse, the eclectic painter and inventor of the telegraph, delivered the first electronic message, ever, via the first telegraph line installed between the basement of the Supreme Court in Washington DC and the first railroad station in Baltimore, Maryland. The words that Morse sent over that prototypical line couldn't be more prophetic: "What Hath God Wrought". At that moment, a new world was born, redefining communications, distance, geography and the concept of a new *networked* third space as a virtual telematic environment for connecting remote participants.

Nearly 200 years after the birth of the telegraph, this is precisely the world that Roger Mills details in Tele-Improvisation: Intercultural Interaction in the Online Global Jam Session. Now that we are fully immersed in the global information culture that Samuel Morse foresaw so many years ago, Mills has provided a timely exposé on the musical and artistic potential and histories of networked performance in the third space. I see this volume urgently relevant in the current day crises of the network and its social media channels that have grown into a dangerous pariah

eating away at our social, political and economic systems. In the age of big data, ubiquitous surveillance, fake news, invasive advertising, loss of privacy, etc., we can clearly see the dystopic ramifications of Morse's prophetic words. However, contained in this rich volume of artistic and musical practices and their potentialities—the emerging performative techniques of the network—we also have a sense that Morse might have been forecasting an explosive artistic renaissance resulting from the embrace of the network as a medium for new forms of creativity.

So what exactly has God wrought? Whether or not you believe there is an unseen deity behind the ever-expanding technology of the network, we can now think of the age-old concept of the theatre of the third space in an entirely new way. In the age of telecommunications, now we might say that the first space represents the physical world, those spaces that the theatrical arena once exclusively inhabited. The second space constitutes the remote participants who are logged into their computers and are connected from anywhere in the world. And the third space is shared networked space, where we can interact with one another at a distance: from conversation to sharing media to musical tele-improvisation. The great artistic potential, now, is that the third space is free from the constraints of the laws of the known world, the constraints of distance and geography, proximity and location. Thus, as pointed out in the volume, we see a collapse of the separation between global cultures and their active participants: both virtually and actually.

And as Mills points out, it is the artist who is perhaps most powerfully suited to activating the third space as a socially and creatively engaged medium for dissolving these arbitrary boundaries and distinctions. In these times of cyber-crises, it seems, we can look to the artist for clarity, vision, optimism, insight and authenticity. The history of telematic art of the twentieth century reveals profound idealism and radical thought, invention and experimentation, sometimes to the point of ecstatic utopianism, regarding the future and potential of the network, long before many of these possibilities became mainstream. In today's culture of rampant individual and collective expression as found in blogs, listservs, electronic bulletin boards and social media, Mills provides a critical overview of the pioneering telematic artists and theorists who have paved the way. These include such pioneers as Kit Galloway, Sherrie Rabinowitz, Paul Sermon, Roy Ascott, Douglas Davis and Robert X. Adrian, as well as a host of contemporary electronic musicians who have expanded our thinking and experience of networked musical performance in the third space.

To heed Samuel Morse's warning, we must develop survival tactics in a complex telematic world. I believe this book makes a strong case for the artist and musician as visionary, a guiding light in the illumination and understanding of the dramatically shifting reality of a post-physical world. Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the mid-1960s, just before the Internet emerged and as electronic culture was transforming the globe via the medium of television: "I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it". And that is precisely the role of the artist, to visualise worlds that no one else has imagined, to

advance human thought and creativity and to look hard and critically at the tools that have become pervasive in the global media culture.

Roger Mills here provides a prescient view of networked technology in the hands of the artist, detailing how musical performance has been transformed by experimentalists of the online medium that operate well below the radar of the mainstream musical and art world. He brings these practices and practitioners to the light of day, so that we can re-evaluate and better understand the creative potential of the information space we inhabit. If in fact we are indeed witnessing a mass migration into the third space, tethered to our mobile devices 24/7 as we are, we need more than ever the knowledge of how networked artists are advancing the most ancient of all social activity: the theatre of the third space.

Washington, DC, USA   Randall Packer
July 2018

Preface

This book is the culmination of many years performing, and thinking about, intercultural improvisatory music made possible by the Internet. As a classically trained trumpeter and self-taught improviser, the ability to improvise with cross-cultural musicians online gained a conceptual hold in the late 1990s. As will be discussed shortly, networked music making has a much longer history of technologists, musicians and sound artists hacking programming languages and developing software to link machines and dispersed performers together. However, it was through my participation in the beta-testing stages of various telematic audio systems that questions about the interaction between displaced performers became more important than those between performer and interface. It also became clear that despite the Internet connecting many world cultures, the majority of online collaborations were taking place between performers in North American and Europe. Western styles of blues, jazz, rock, electronic and electro-acoustic music dominated the networked music landscape.

Against this backdrop, the impetus to collaborate with musicians of different cultures led to the foundation of the network music ensemble, Ethernet Orchestra. The group emerged in 2007 as a result of a call for improvisers on media lists, and via word of mouth. It has subsequently developed into a circle of expert musicians from Australia, Malaysia, China, Mongolia, Iran, the UK, France, Germany and the USA. Ethernet Orchestra performs to audiences online and in physical spaces, radio broadcasts, as well as in educational contexts. These performances have led to many hours of informal discussions with fellow collaborators about the complexities of tele-improvisatory experience from different cultural perspectives. Topics have centred around perception, agency and presence in displaced musical interaction, as well as negotiation of unfamiliar tuning systems, modes and rhythm cycles, and the effects of climate and circadian rhythms on players' creativity. These conversations have been formative in the development of this research and the lines of enquiry it has taken. They have also allowed me to talk with fellow performers in the immediate context of online performances, and in the language of performance practices, rather than in theoretical or technical terms. It should be noted that while the case study performances described in this book include

members of Ethernet Orchestra, they also feature a range of other players and were not performed under the guise of the Ethernet Orchestra. To maintain a distance from the performance analysis, I did not contribute as a performer in any way. While there are many good examples of auto-ethnographic studies, I felt it necessary to assume the role of disinterested researcher while still having an intimate knowledge of, and expertise within, the field of study.

Ethernet Orchestra has also provided me with opportunities to integrate our work into my university teaching of music and sound courses. Audio-visual recordings of our performances have made engaging material for the analysis of intercultural improvisation as well as discussions about culture and agency, and authorship in tele-collaborative performance contexts. The ensemble has also participated in networked performance projects with students from UNNC Orchestra (University of Nottingham, Ningbo Campus in China); the Bachelor of Sound and Music Design, UTS (University of Technology Sydney, Australia); and the Bachelor of Music program at ECU (Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia). Each of these collaborations has enabled students to learn specific technical, creative and tele-collaborative skills with students they would not likely have otherwise met.

The experiences I have gained from these collaborations have not only shaped the approaches I take in this book but have also informed my conviction that future creative and collaborative music and sound practices will be networked and distributed across global distances and cultures. While this already occurs in business, creative media industries and, to some extent, education, it is yet to be fully explored in mainstream tertiary music education. International composers, sound designers and musicians are increasingly working with geographically dispersed professionals in the production of high-end film music and sound for games. This point is echoed by a friend, the acclaimed British film music composer, Jon Wygens, who says he would not be able to do the work he does without conducting most of his creative work over the Internet. Notwithstanding this reality, there is a dearth of university music and sound courses that provide students with the necessary literacies to work professionally in tele-collaborative contexts. Such knowledge should include a technical understanding of network architectures, practice-based experience of telematic musical interaction, cultural competencies and intercultural communication skills. I am a strong advocate for the need to develop these skills in an educational model that will equip students for future work in the areas of collaborative music and sound design.

It is from these perspectives that this research seeks to contribute to our understanding of how cross-cultural musicians collaborate and experience tele-musical performance. It presents new practitioner knowledge about how performers of different cultures collaborate in the co-creation of tele-improvisatory musical sound. Each chapter provides musicians, researchers and students with a resource that can be used to understand tele-collaborative music making and enable them to develop it further in their practices.

Sydney, Australia   Roger Mills
2018

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The many perspectives considered throughout these pages would not have been possible without the input of respected artists, musicians and scholars. For this, I would like to thank Randall Packer, Pauline Oliveros, Doug van Nort, Annie Abrahams, Helen Varley-Jamieson, Daniel Pinheiro, Jon Wygens, Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett at Furtherfield. Nela Brown, Ian Whalley, Ken Fields, Ivan Zavada and Helmut Herglotz agreed to be interviewed and provided many insightful reflections from which I have drawn. In the process of writing and editing this book, I also received invaluable oversight and suggestions from Oliver Bown, Michael Kosmider and Paula Terry-Lancaster.

To my collaborators in Ethernet Orchestra, particularly Elke Utermöhlen, Martin Slawig and Chris Vine who have shared endless hours of networked musical exploration and experimentation, I say thank you. A special mention must also go to the late Richard Lainhart, our former collaborator, who now lives on in the words of this book, as well as his wife Caroline Meyers, who has continued her support of the Ethernet Orchestra.

My deepest gratitude goes to my good friend and most vocal critic, Vedad FamourZadeh, for the many nights of collegial argument and debate. So too Aref Toloei and Peyman Sayyadi, who have extended their wealth of knowledge in helping me understand the nuances of improvisation in Persian and Kurdish

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About the Author

Roger Mills is a musician, sound artist and writer whose practice and research focuses on networked music performance, improvisation, music composition and radio. He has also worked as a composer and sound designer for both stage and screen. Roger's credits include sound design for the multiscreen cinema film *Hindsight* (Ignition Films, UK), the score for BAFTA award winning dance theatre performance *At Swim Two Boys* (Earthfall, UK), and a Golden Eye Award for his multistream radio performance *Idea of South* (AU). He is the musical director of the internationally acclaimed Ethernet Orchestra, a networked music ensemble exploring new approaches to intercultural telematic improvisation. The ensemble informs Roger's research at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where he researches cross-cultural interaction in networked and digitally mediated environments. Roger's performances, exhibitions and presentations include works for VIVID Sydney, Sydney Olympic Park, World Sound Design Conference, Taipei, Medi@terra, Athens, ISEA, Istanbul, Sonic Circuits, Washington DC, O-Town Sound, New York, blackhole-factory, Braunschweig, Germany.

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Part I

Chapter 1
Intercultural Tele-Improvisation: Inside the Online Global Jam Session

It is time now for an inclusive curriculum where improvised music is no longer ignored or denigrated. Borders should not only be crossed, but should dissolve.

—Pauline Oliveros

Abstract This chapter introduces the practice of intercultural tele-improvisation and explores the way in which geographically dispersed performers improvise together online across global time zones, disciplines, cultures and musical traditions. It outlines the conceptual foundations of the research featured in this book, its application to the analysis of live online performances, and a summary of its findings. The chapter describes the role of culture in tele-improvisatory interaction and the expression of intentionality in online musical engagement. It also examines the use of metaphor and schematic bodily experience to enable an in-depth understanding of online performers' interactive approaches and strategic thought processes. The chapter concludes with an outline of each chapter and its contribution to the field of cultural computing.

1.1 Introduction

There was a palpable sense of excitement as networked musicians and sound artists from Brazil, Iran, Australia, Mongolia, Germany and Britain logged in online to perform in the UpStage Festival of Cyberformance.[1] Simultaneously broadcast to audiences online, and across fourteen international venues, this performance was one of the most significant networked concerts my Internet music ensemble, Ethernet Orchestra, had played in. The performance, *Oceans between Sound*, featured a diverse range of acoustic and electronic instruments, as well as voice, with VJs[2]

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[1] Details of the festival and performances available at https://upstage.org.nz/blog/?page_id=3447.

[2] The term VJ or video jockey refers to visual artists who mix live cinematic collages of video and images in real-time to live or pre-recorded music or sound.